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A/N: First fanfic and self-beta'd. You have been warned!

- Control -
Prologue I

Black fire burned behind my closed eyes.

Slowly, the flames parted and I drifted back into consciousness. Pain... I thought, barely stifling a hiss as I felt my cracked ribs protest my very breathing. I hate this place.

I lay there for a long moment, gathering myself, calling upon my immeasurable will and wreathing my mind in a sphere of blackest obsidian – Occlumency in its more advanced stage. My breathing evened after several long moments of internal reflection, my body once again enslaved to its master's will. Better...

Slowly, I sat up and looked around the smallest bedroom at #4 Privet Drive, stifling a wince as I looked at the splatters of blood on the floor near where I had lain. The coughing from earlier... lung damage? I mused to myself, sighing quietly and dragging myself to my feet, feeling hairline cracks spread across the barriers of my mind as my body rebelled. A will to shatter stars... I repeated within the halls of my mind – my mantra, my creed – and clarity returned.

This can't go on... I can't let it go on... I thought, standing rigidly in place. 12 years is far too long to suffer in a place such as this... my thoughts darkened, a sudden spike of fury rattled my occluded mind. It was too sudden to stop, too strong, too furious to contain – I snarled in pain as the freshly-made barriers shattered, the pain returning and warring with the anger.

"Control yourself, Potter," I growled aloud, my arms wrapping around my wounded midsection as I slumped against a wall, not allowing myself to slide down it. Hard enough to get up once... must focus... I whispered within the halls of my mind, slowly reforming the shields anew and sighing in relief as the pain faded.

"This is all your fault Dumbledore..." I whispered darkly, looking around the room and letting my eyes light on the snowy owl in the

corner, glaring lightly as she hooted at me. "You know it is, the old bastard sent me back here... I told him this would happen..." I sighed, forcing the anger away before it could break my newly-regained control.

How long had I suffered because of that old fool and his meddling? My thoughts betrayed me, refusing to stay contained despite my burgeoning prowess in the mental arts. They warred against me, demanding retribution against perceived wrongs. A familiar chill ran up my spine as my thoughts darkened, the single window in the room rattled within its framing and a low growl escaped my constricting throat. What I would give for a single moment of freedom from this place...

Freedom.

Something I'd been denied my entire life. Enslaved to suffering for reasons I could not yet fathom. Oh, I knew the stories – stories of dark lords, stories of murder and sacrifice. Sometimes I wish I had gone with you mother, it would be so much simpler... I thought, turning my eyes up to the white plaster ceiling.

I closed my eyes again, focusing inward and entering a mindscape that reflected my torment – a war-torn patch of broken land surrounded by a shell of darkest obsidian. I never could get it to look like Hogwarts... I thought with a trace of dark amusement, looking at the ruined remnants of a castle around me. I walked slowly through the halls of thought and memory, glaring balefully at a door reinforced with iron bars, the faintest feminine scream still audible if one listened closely. Hello mother...

I continued on, deeper into the ruins, the corridors growing smaller and more crowded. More doors were in this hallway, more doors than could possibly have rooms – this area was from before. Before I had learned Occlumency, before I had brought peace to the maelstrom of my mind. All of these memories I had hurriedly organized in my rush to form workable shields, many of my memories had been damaged by the effort. I was such a fool... I thought, opening a door at random and stepping through, sighing explosively as I beheld the massive beast from the Chamber in all its glory.

Hello... well, we never did quite get on speaking terms, did we? I thought bemusedly, walking around the basilisk – currently frozen in a striking posture above a small boy. I was so small... am so small. I corrected with a grimace. Was it really only a month ago? A month since I'd been broken by the remnant of Tom Riddle, a month since I'd battled a beast of legend... a month since she had died.

Perhaps the Dursleys are my penance...? I asked myself, stepping past the giant snake and walking to the ethereal form of my most hated nemesis. Is he truly, though? The thought gave me pause. True, it's his fault I'm here, his fault I suffer... but is Dumbledore not just as much to blame? Isn't this broken world just as much to blame for allowing it all to happen? For allowing me to... fall... I sighed again, sitting down on the damp stone floor and looking at the murky water that pooled before Salazar Slytherin's statue.

I still felt guilty from time to time, guilty for the knowledge I had sought and the dark gifts I had developed. If only they knew... I thought with a trace of amusement. My eyes locked on a single, suspended drop of water falling from high above down to the murky water before me. As I watched it began to move, slowly at first then finally plopping into the water at speed – the memory had begun to play.

The boy dodged to the side just as the huge serpent crashed into the masonry behind him. No help is coming... he thought, panic cracking the occlumency he had so recently learned. I'm... going to die here... his thoughts were betraying him, weakening him. He dove behind a pillar, not daring a look back – knowing the eyes would kill him just as soon as the massive, poisonous jaws. I'm such a fool...

He let out a yelp as the column behind him shook with sudden impact and dashed away from the falling stone. No help for it... please don't miss ... he thought, turning and training his eyes on the ground as he blindly fired the first curse that came to mind, "Diffindo!" A beam of crimson flashed from his wand, impacting the side of the basilisk's open mouth and dislodging a single scale – he had aimed at its eye.

"Damnit!" He cursed, turning a corner and fleeing into a series of tubes as he heard the beast crash into a pillar behind him – the sudden direction change had sent it sprawling. Get it in here, easier

to aim... I need something stronger... he thought, recalling all the trips to the Restricted Section, all the spells he'd learned by wand light behind the safety of his drapes. Dark magic...? There's no choice... he thought, unable to stifle the rush of exhilaration at finally daring to use the taboo magicks – the rush was short-lived, however. Can I even cast them...?

He knew what was required, of course. It had indirectly led him to learn the mind arts, after all. He had wanted an escape from the sorrow and the rage that was his life, a way to take control of his storming emotions and a way to lock away the nightmares of memory. An obscure text in the Restricted Section had referenced it and he'd spent nearly the entire year learning it. Among other things... he thought darkly, turning another corner and stumbling as he tripped over a small pile of rat skeletons.

Hate and rage were needed to cast the dark curses, dark emotions to fuel dark intent. No shortage of either of those... he thought with some trace of amusement despite the panic chiseling away at his mind. The problem was focus, and that had been another reason he'd sought the shelter of an occluded mind. He had followed the book's tenants, he had ignored the warnings of seeking too much progress too quickly, and he had mostly succeeded. Mostly...

He had managed to block the memories of his torturous childhood some months back, and now he knew he'd have to open them again. He hadn't separated the emotions as the book had said; instead, he'd rushed to lock them away... and now he'd have to face them again. Along with a 30-meter snake... brilliant...

"You stupid beast! Kill him already!" A voice shouted from somewhere down another pipe, causing Harry to snarl. This fool was the reason he was here after all, this fool and her. He ducked into another pipe as he heard the serpent draw closer. I'm tired of running. He thought suddenly, stopping in his tracks and looking down at the wand gripped tightly in his hand. With a single, intense glare of focus he ripped open the halls of his memory and let the nightmares free.

His arm snapped audibly as his Uncle wrenched him up from his cupboard and slammed him into a wall...

He hacked blood as Dudley and Piers rained kicks onto his abdomen...

He stumbled up the stairs, ears still ringing from the impact of Aunt Petunia's frying pan on his skull...

A woman screamed his name as viridian fire claimed her life...

Harry faltered, forcing down the bile in his throat as the memories struck him with vengeance; turning and focusing all the hate he could glean from the stream of memory. "Falx!" he roared, jerking his wand in a horizontal arc through the air just as the massive basilisk turned the corner. A scythe of violet power roared forward, slamming into the beast's face and drawing a howl of rage from its open mouth and a grin of sick pleasure from its intended victim.

Hope it hurts, fucking abomination... he thought, dashing back into the more open area of the Chamber and glaring at the remnant of Voldemort standing over... her...

Ginny Weasley had been a port in a storm. His first year had been dismal; he made few friends – a half-blood in a house of pureblooded serpents. He had sought shelter in the arms of knowledge, but he refused to be like that mudblood Granger. He had studied in secret, studied spells to warp and strengthen the mind, spells of darkest wrath and blackest intent to be found in Hogwarts. He had braved Knockturn Alley in the summer months, spending what he dared take from his trust vault on illegal tomes. He told himself he'd use the knowledge to break free from the life he'd suffered, and yet all it had done was isolate him further. Ginny had spoken to him and sought him out despite her fool brother's anti-Slytherin propaganda.

He had helped her with classes she struggled with, been her friend as those in her own house isolated her, held her when she cried and she'd returned the favor when his fledgling attempts at Occlumency failed and the memories washed over him anew...

And now she's going to die... his thoughts whispered, watching as the memory of Riddle grew more opaque. No... NO! he snarled, bringing his wand forward. "Cruormorsis!" he shouted as a sphere of sickly yellow-green erupting forth from his wand and passed through the shade of Voldemort, drawing a cackling laugh from the specter.

"Dark magic, Harry? So surprising... a pity that you're a bit early, try again in a few more moments," the teenaged Dark Lord stated mockingly. I really fucking hate him... Harry thought, turning just in time to hear an echoing roar – the serpent had recovered. It entered the room and swirled its ruined head, fluid oozing from two ravaged eye sockets and mingling with the poison steadily dripping from bared fangs. He looks pissed...

A cool wind blew up his spine as he beheld the beast, his eyes closing involuntarily for a single moment. What was that...? He queried his mind, opening his eyes as the beast's head snapped to face him. I'm so tired of running... thoughts began to turn to despair within him, and yet the chill in his spine intensified, spreading through him and replacing his doubt with purpose. Is this dark magic? He thought in surprise as he felt his mind clear, eyes narrowing when the clarity made it easier to hold on to the rage he'd earlier bought from memory.

To hell with it, I'd sooner die here with Ginny than run like a coward any longer... he stated determinedly within his mind, raising his wand to the approaching serpent. "Cruormorsis!" he growled out, the same sickly yellow-green sphere racing from his wand and impacting the serpent's ruined head, splashing across it and immediately searing it away with acid. Harry smiled grimly as the beast thrashed before him, launching a quartet of dark cutting curses at its body – two of which found their targets and opened deep gashes in the beast's neck.

He was panting now, the exertion of the spells tiring him even as they filled him with euphoria. The coolness in his back was now a hungering cold, demanding more – needing more. Why is it still moving...? He thought in dismay, watching as the beast began to inch towards him once more, opening its maw wide and rearing back to strike.

Let this work... "Cryomortis!" Harry yelled and pointed his wand into the gaping maw before him as a sphere of purest cerulean flew forth. The curse bathed the beast's mouth and fangs in hoarfrost as it passed, making it halfway down the gullet of the serpent before detonating and snap-freezing internal organs and flesh alike.

Harry fell to his knees from exertion, watching as the basilisk swayed for a moment before finally falling to the stone floor. "If he gets up from that I quit," the dark-haired boy quipped, slowly pushing himself up to his feet then grunting as he was blasted across the room. He impacted a stone column with a sickening crunch and slid to the floor, dazed.

"A valiant performance, Mr. Potter. A pity it was all in vain," a voice mocked him, the sound of footfalls – solid footfalls – echoing on the cold stone. No... too late... Harry thought dazedly, his mind slow to recover from the impact and the haze of pain that followed. Ginny...

"You took her from me..." Harry whispered, pushing himself to his feet and swaying before finally locking eyes with the creature before him. "I'll kill you..." he whispered, eyes flicking to the pale body lying on the stone some distance back. The cold in his back had spread now; a black fire consuming warmth and spreading hate. Icy fingers wrapped around his heart and began to squeeze.

"I welcome you to tr—" the Dark Lord started.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Another droplet fell and impacted the water, the ripples spreading in concentric rings before slowing and stopping along with the memory that bound them. I stood slowly and dusted off my pants, a pointless gesture within the halls of one's mind – yet it helped to bring a semblance of closure to the now-frozen memory. I turned and slowly walked past the cold body on the ground, refusing to spare her a glance. I walked past the mutilated corpse of the serpent, past the shocked face of a teenaged Dark Lord, ducked my head under an arc of viridian lightning and patted the shoulder of my enraged younger self.

"We tried," I whispered quietly, continuing forward – my footfalls oddly loud on the cold stone.

The door closed behind me as I stepped away from the memory, turning my eyes up to the ruined ceiling. Enough reminiscing... I thought to myself, wiping a few traitorous tears from my eyes as my mindscape fell away to be replaced with dilapidated furniture and blood-spattered floorboards. Welcome back to the waking world, Harry Potter... I thought mockingly to myself, glancing at the door

before pulling out the pocket watch Ginny had given me at Christmas. 9:38pm.

I pushed myself away from the wall and immediately faltered, forgetting my wound for a moment before pain spiked past the barriers of my mind and struck home. I'm sick of dancing to the tune of dark lords and doddering old fools... the thought gave me pause. It wasn't that the thought was particularly new – it wasn't – but it struck a chord with the memory I'd so recently relived.

Ginny is gone. Tom Riddle took her just as he took my parents... and Dumbledore will take what's left of me by keeping me here... I thought to myself, hearing my Uncle's heavy footfalls and bracing myself with all of my will as the door slammed open.

"Boy! Get down here and wash the dishes for your aunt! You know she works hard to feed us," I never see any of it... "and the least you can do is clean up for her!" Vernon roared, stepping forward and grasping me by the neck and pinning me to the wall. He spared a glance at the splatters of blood on the floor and continued "And if you so much as mention your disciplining to that... that... Headmaster of yours, you're going back in that cupboard and you'll wish you'd have died in that car accident with those freak parents of yours!"

"It wasn't a car accident," I whispered, wondering where the sudden rebellious words came from and bracing myself for the strike to follow. I wasn't to be disappointed as a sudden backhand sent me tumbling to the floor.

"Shut your freakish mouth! What have I told you about backtalk!" Vernon snarled and kicked my already bruised ribs once before turning and stomping from the room. Hate him... hate this entire family... I thought and slowly pushed myself up and spat out another mouthful of blood. Hate Voldemort, hate Dumbledore... hate this world...

A familiar chill spread up my spine.

That feeling again... I thought, my eyes widening slightly. I hadn't felt that euphoria since the Chamber. Why do I suffer here? What's the point? They'll kill me long before I graduate Hogwarts...

My thoughts darkened as I questioned why I suffered; the black fire in my breast spread as I considered the die I had been cast in... and ways to break it. I heard my Uncle yell my name again from the bottom of the stairs. My eyes slowly tracked to the open door to my room; it was the first time the locks had been released in a week. Freedom... all it would take is a few spells... Azkaban is better than this, if it could even hold me...

I smiled then, truly one of the first and only times I would ever do so within these halls. A numbing chill spread through me, sheets of ice forming along the barriers of my mind. I welcomed the cold.

I picked up my watch from where it had fallen and inspected it. 9:49pm – perfect time to change my world. I thought with some amount of dark amusement.

The door beckoned me and I answered the call, walking through it and feeling the anticipation grow within me. I'm taking control; to hell with all of this... I thought darkly, my steps seemed to take ages to descend. Ginny wouldn't want me to suffer here...

"He's finally coming, dad!" the youngest fat whale proclaimed in glee, his girth taking up the entire hallway at the bottom of the stairs. "How's the ribs, Potter?" Dudley asked with a wicked grin on his pudgy face.

"Falx," I whispered, almost caressing the words with my tongue as the dark cleaving curse lanced from my wand and severed my dear cousin's legs at the thighs. His screams are... amazing. They spoke to some part of me, whispered within the depths of my mind and spread the cold stain on my back.

"Dudley? What are you going..." Aunt Petunia appeared from the living room, her eyes widened as she beheld the twitching stumps of her son's legs. Dudley was rapidly going into shock on the floor.

"I don't think he's getting up, Aunt Petunia," I stated mockingly, raising my wand and snarling a familiar acid curse as she opened her mouth to scream. The curse struck her high in the chest, eating through her small endowments and soon exposing the ribs and tissue beneath. She fell back to the floor, gurgling and twitching as the acid continued to consume her flesh. The bones are so... white... I thought suddenly.

I walked into the living room and suddenly found myself staring down the barrel of my uncle's shotgun. "You... you freak!" Vernon snarled - the open gun cabinet behind him was an obvious source of the weapon. I forgot all about that. I thought. "Look what you did to your... my... I'll kill you!" the lump of a man roared, time seemed to slow as I hurriedly put one foot within my mindscape.

Protego works on magic and reflects it, less effective on physical attacks... I was wracking his brain at this point, part of me running down ruined hallways and flinging open ironbound doors. I watched as Vernon leveled the weapon slowly; time traveled differently in the realm of thought. Something... something... suddenly it came to me, my wand rose as my lips muttered a word I'd until now only read on yellowed parchment, "Reverto Telum."

The shotgun fired a moment later, the buckshot disappearing into a dark miasma that sprung to existence before me. "You fucking little fre—," Vernon's words were cut off as the mist reformed and suddenly redirected the deadly projectiles. The oversized man gurgled as over a dozen lead bearings slammed into his chest and stomach.

"A return spell, Uncle Vernon," I explained in my best Granger-voice. "It was created in the 1600s to redirect arrows from archer fire. I confess, I wasn't sure if it would work on muggle bullets... they travel so much faster, you see." I continued mockingly, unable to resist a chuckle as my uncle fell over the couch and crawled towards the fallen shotgun. "A pity though, as there seems to be a limit to how much velocity it can reflect..." I mused aloud and watched impassively as my uncle reached the weapon and managed to pump it once, chambering a new shell. "Something to consider for later," I finally concluded and raised my wand once more.

"Crucio," I whispered almost lovingly, truly the most affectionate voice I'd ever dared use around my family. A pulse of red energy struck and Vernon screamed loudly, hands twitching and firing the weapon in his hands again – the shot slamming uselessly into the nearby TV and bringing a hail of sparks from the ruined electronics. "Careful uncle, what will the neighbors think?" I asked with a mocking drawl, twisting my wand and forcing more of the hate forward. The spell intensified, causing arcs of crimson energy to dance over the beached whale before me. Vernon's back arched to

nearly impossible degrees as froth spilled from his open mouth. This is incredible... I thought, feeling the feedback of the Unforgivable, the euphoria cracking the shields of my mind and letting the raging inferno of dark fire seep into my thoughts. I cackled loudly then, pricks of madness dotting my vision.

Suddenly, a staccato of pops sounded from outside the house and brought my occlumency shields slamming back into place. The chill within me rebelled as I cut the torture curse but I forced it down with sheer will alone, this was no time to revel in my vengeance. The popping sounds were unnatural in a muggle neighborhood, and I wracked my brain for the cause. Apparition makes such noises... I recalled from a textbook on the art, my eyes widening as I realized what I'd been doing. Aurors... Ministry tracking charms on my wand, underage magic, unforgivables... I'm such a fool! Panic set in then as I rapidly cast a cleaving charm at my uncle to finish him and looked around hurriedly for an escape.

I have to get out of here... I thought, looking around at the broken remnants of my family. Dudley had long since bled out on the floor, Petunia's organs were visible beneath the bleached bones of her chest, and the cleaving curse had split Vernon from hip to shoulder. I looked at the discarded shotgun nearby, hoping that the aurors wouldn't recognize the muggle firearm for what it was. I lifted it with my free hand, grunting at the weight and casting a quick lightening charm on the weapon, pumping it once as my uncle had done. Slowly and quietly I slipped to the hallway before the front door, just as I heard the quiet murmuring of an unlocking charm on the other side. I spared a glance at the weapon in my hand, trying not to dwell on the fact that my knowledge of muggle firearms likely wasn't much greater than that of my adversaries; I knew where the trigger was though and the results of what happened when I pulled it, and that would have to be enough.

Hopefully the firearm would give me an edge before I had to resort to magic, as I knew aurors were trained in defense against the dark arts I employed. Still... my thoughts were interrupted when I heard the first quiet footfalls in the hallway. I steeled myself and swung out, holding the lightened firearm forward with my left hand and firing before the auror got over the shock of seeing a child wielding the long stick of metal and wood. My eyes bulged as the recoil struck, the lightened weapon only served to increase its force and I winced at the sound of my wrist snapping. The shotgun fell from my limp

hands, striking the floor at almost the same time as the first auror. I'm such a fool... I hissed to myself at my own ignorance of muggle weapons – I hadn't even considered the damnable things could strike back at you!

I ducked hurriedly into the kitchen, trying to focus on anything but the pain as a stunner slammed into the open doorway I'd just vacated. Of course, aurors travel in pairs... I thought, glancing at the plaster wall between kitchen and hallway. Dudley tripped and nearly fell through that once... my thoughts continued, recalling how weak and thin the plaster truly was and raising my wand towards it. "Falx!" I whispered, making a wide diagonal slash across the wall as the curse rushed forward, carving through the unenforced muggle obstruction and sending a gout of blood through the nearly-made hole.

I felt more than heard the anguished scream of the second auror on the other side, my eyes widening almost comically. I just killed two aurors... My thoughts were coming harder now, a familiar heady euphoria spreading through me and consuming any notions of grief or regret over my actions. I needed to get out of this house, needed to get away from here. Maybe the Knight Bus?

I rushed out into the hallway to leave only to trip over the body of the first auror, who I realized to my shock was still alive. The man locked eyes with me; he gurgled on his own blood and reached for my leg while his other hand fumbled in his robes. I snarled at him, kicking at him viciously and succeeded in freeing my leg just as he pulled a length of golden chain from his robes and disappeared in a flash. Portkey... I didn't spare a thought to how close I had come to being transported to the Ministry as I jumped over the corpse of the very-much-dead second auror and fled the house.

A sudden vindictive anger sparked in me as I looked at the perfectly-manicured front lawn, turning with a hiss of rage and firing off a trio of flame curses into the open door and windows. I smiled grimly as the enchanted flames grew and began to consume the setting of many of my nightmares, though my revelry would be short-lived. I turned at the series of sudden pops behind me, firing a spell before I even registered the new arrivals completely.

Two more aurors had arrived; my acid-burst spell struck the shoulder of the one on the right just as he was spinning around. It

splashed over his face, sending him to the ground screaming as I turned to face off against the other. My eyes widened at the head of familiar bright pink hair before me. "Tonks!" I exclaimed, recognition seemed to dawn in her eyes and her wand lowered slightly.

"Harry...? What are you doing here?" She asked, eyes hardening as she spared a glance at the now-dead auror some meters away from us. "What in the buggering hell have you done, Harry?" She asked again, the tears prickling in her eyes were visible even from my distance.

I wracked my brain for an excuse, for a reason to give her that didn't mention the dark hate within me or the stain on my soul that was spreading within my breast. "Tonks, I..." I started, my own wand faltering. More aurors would be arriving soon, but I didn't want to fight the woman before me – and yet I'd have to if I wished to escape. Or will I...? "Imperio!"

The sudden unforgivable by a 13-year old wizard struck her by surprise – she was still a trainee auror, I had to remind myself. Confusion flooded the link to her mind that the spell had created, and I recognized what I had to do. "Tonks, help me!" I cried into her mind, injecting my mental voice with the very real panic I was feeling. "They're trying to hurt me!" I continued, just as several more pops heralded the arrival of reinforcements. It hurt me to twist the mild affection she felt for me to my own ends, but the regret was swiftly crushed by the swelling cold in my chest. I felt her anger at my would-be adversaries as she turned and squared off with two of the new arrivals.

I dashed across the street as the sound of spellfire echoed from my left when I suddenly tripped and smashed my face into the pavement. I wrenched my legs apart from the tripping jinx and glared hatefully at the gnarled auror that had just appeared to my right.

"Enough Potter," the man grumbled, his staff alight with power as he leveled it at me. I pushed myself up slowly then snarled out my favorite cleaving curse, watching in dismay as he simply raised his staff – both halves of the curse splitting and dissipating behind him. "I've seen it all before, lad," the man continued, firing a magenta curse that I'd never seen with such a speed I couldn't so much as raise a shield.

I fell over when the spell struck me with sudden nausea. Panic curse...? I realized, feeling the barriers of my mind begin to crumble from the assault. "Tonks! Save me!" I yelled down the still-open channel to the auror's mind, feeling her respond. I forced myself to my feet just as a hail of spells flew over my shoulder and impacted the shield of the grizzled auror before me, hearing his muttered curse as he was forced to deal with his new aggressor.

The panic curse was still affecting me, seeping into my mind and filling me with doubt. I ran to the house across from #4 and jumped the fence, hiding in the back yard as the fear took hold of me. I fought with it, warred against the rebellious thoughts in my head and finally shook it off. "Should have stunned me, one-eyed codger..." I muttered under my breath, hearing the sounds of spellfire begin to fade moments before the connection to Tonks was suddenly and violently cut. Now what...? My eyes scanned the fenced-in backyard around me just before the fence turned into a 5-meter high wall of stone in a powerful display of transfiguration.

"Harry Potter!" A voice roared from the other side of the house, and I felt the blood in my veins match the temperature of the chill within my soul. Albus Dumbledore had arrived.

The panic within me had nothing to do with the curse from earlier as I leaned against the back of the house. I'm done for... They'll give me the kiss me for this... My thoughts were traitorous but correct, I realized. There was no choice for it, no avoiding what was to come. My thoughts returned to Dumbledore. Figures the puppet master would come to see the results of his work... I thought savagely, a new resolve blossoming within me. Maybe the aurors would kill me rather than capture me; maybe I could bring the king down with his pawn...

I knew not the source of the confidence within me as I stepped out from behind the house. Slowly, I walked forward with purpose to the front lawn and faced no less than half a dozen aurors and the man who had slain the Dark Lord Grindlewald himself. I noticed Tonks among the aurors flanking the old man; the look of betrayal in her eyes very nearly brought me to tears. I forced down the sorrow and latched on to the familiar rage – there was strength in anger, strength to change one's destiny. For better or worse...

"What have you done, Harry?" The man asked, the golden gerbils running around his enchanted robes all stopped in their frolicking to give me disapproving looks. It was mildly disturbing. How does he do that, anyway? I grumbled within, though my face remained impassive.

I sneered at him and the last vestiges of the twinkle in his eyes. "I cut the strings," I stated simply, watching as the final twinkling died when he processed my metaphor. I grinned savagely at that; it was a victory in itself as far as I was concerned.

"You've killed tonight, Harry," Dumbledore stated, his eyes boring into mine and sending warning flags into my mind as my occlumency shields were tested. I shifted my gaze to his spotted nose and glared at it for all I was worth.

"Don't you read the Prophet, Professor?" I asked mockingly. "According to them, Ginny Weasley was my first murder." I continued, recalling the hateful articles condemning me as a dark lord in training ever since I'd walked into the infirmary at Hogwarts with the pale, lifeless body in my arms.

"We both know that wasn't you, Harry," the man across from me continued. I watched as the aurors all spread out in a semicircle around me, though they kept their wands lowered just as I did. They seemed content to let me and the Headmaster have a bit of a heart-to-heart here in the middle of Privet Drive, surrounded by broken bodies and the light of a burning house.

"Of course it wasn't, it was you!" I snarled, the hate within me cresting the walls of my mind and forcing action. My wand snapped up and fired a spell; a globe of cerulean flew forward – though it was far too slow, as the old man fired another spell just as quickly. The spells collided in midair, my frost spell detonating far too close to me and too far from any intended targets. Shards of ice sliced into my flesh, drawing numerous small wounds and filling the area with a thick fog of snap-frozen air.

I refused to be denied, bringing my wand up again and focusing on the slight outline of the old man through the haze. "Avada Kedavra!" I snarled, gathering all of the black hate within my breast and shoving it into my wand. The gathered aurors wore expressions of shock as viridian flame bloomed at the tip of my wand and bathed all

those gathered in an emerald glow. Lightning lanced through the air, arcing wide and curving back towards its intended target. The auror's wands were rising, but they would be too slow. The old man himself seemed frozen in shock, shock that I could possibly harbor enough hate for him to use the darkest of the Unforgivables. I watched with sick amusement as the gerbils on the front of his robes all fled to his back in fear.

"Albus!" the nearest auror shouted and dove in front of the curse. I watched in dismay as it struck his shoulder and sent him spiraling to the ground; emerald sparks danced over his flesh and between the teeth of his open mouth, snuffing out the last vestiges of life and severing the anchors of his soul. It was beautiful in a way, bringing a familiar euphoria of darkness into me that helped to overcome the sense of failure over not claiming the headmaster.

I locked eyes with the old manipulator as the return fire of the aurors struck me, sending me flying into the air to crash into a tree on the property behind me. I heard more than felt the snap of my spine; my legs immediately going numb as I fell to the ground in a heap. A disarming spell had claimed my wand at some point during my aerial journey, and I realized I was defeated. I slid my hand into my pocket slowly and withdrew the watch that Ginny had given me. The face was cracked down the center, and the bronze framing was dented in a few places – but still it told me what I wished to know more than anything. 10:02pm. 13 minutes of freedom... I thought, smiling suddenly and hacking up a globule of blood from my newly-punctured lungs.

I began to laugh then, a mad cackling sound that visibly unnerved the aurors and caused a heartsick expression to appear on the up to now stoic old man. Equal parts blood and laughter escaped my lips as I turned my blurry gaze to the man that I held responsible for all of my suffering. "13 minutes!" I yelled at him and his damnable gerbils, just as a quartet of stunners slammed into my broken body and drove away my consciousness.

A/N: Please read and review.

Prologue II

Twilight flame bloomed around me.

It embraced me, twirling about me with the fluid grace of a born dancer. I watched transfixed as it teased me, ebbing closer before falling away. A cool wind blew against me when it closed, and I felt a profound sense of loss when it receded. Finally, on one of these tidal shifts the flame simply continued to recede. I panicked, reaching forward in an attempt to touch the veil of dark fire; my fingertips brushed the flame for a single moment in time, and frost glazed my fingernails.

I awoke stumbling atop a broken tower, my hand outstretched towards the overcast sky above. I tried not to dwell on the vision I'd just seen, turning instead and looking out at the broken wasteland and torn ruins beneath me. I would recognize my mindscape anywhere.

I exhaled explosively and leaned against a stunted column near where I stood. What was that...? I questioned, casting my gaze over the planes of my mind and waiting for it to answer. The wind changed direction once, twice, and then died completely. Yeah, I don't know either...

I glanced back at the sky and frowned as I beheld the dark glass of my occlumency shields. They were cracked in many areas, with a single area directly above the tower on which I stood sporting a puncture. Twilight flame poured from the breach and raced out along the insides of the shell, rapidly consuming the cloudy sky with fire. I tried not to dwell on what that meant.

I could tell by the opaqueness of the dome that my physical body was still unconscious; I was trapped here until whatever magic that bound my consciousness was released. Probably a stunner. I mused, turning and standing at the precipice of the tower before leaning forward and diving off.

Wind rushed at my face as I plummeted to the ruins below; I smiled then, it brought a familiar pang of freedom. Freedom.

Moments before impact I extended my will and opened my arms wide; the wind rose in a gale and caught me, setting me gently on

the ground. I glanced back at the tower behind me, the center of it gutted by some impact. Neither magic nor masonry allowed the tower to stand with such a wound; my will alone kept it aloft. This was my mind after all, and within this shell of dark glass I was a god.

I turned and walked into the ruins, up a staircase and into a hallway of memory. I cocked my head as I spotted a door open some way down before approaching it. Wisps of gold escaped the door and flitted about me where I stood. I must have been dreaming, I realized. I had not had a dream I could remember ever since I managed to occlude my mind, yet I realized my dreams had never stopped – I'd simply stopped remembering them. Or ignored them.

I walked into the open door, curious to see what it was that had prompted this dream. I found myself standing in the Great Hall of Hogwarts herself in all her glory, students littering her tables. A glance at the enchanted night sky above told me it was dinner time, while a look at the head table revealed a turban-clad pawn. First year, then.

Turning and slipping past a group of Ravenclaws, frozen in their chatting, I walked towards the Slytherin table. I cast a baleful look over my housemates before setting my eyes on a lone head of dark hair sitting apart from his peers. I stood beside him, watching as his wild hair slowly began to move. His robes started to rustle as well, shifting over his overly-skinny form as he stood. I think I remember now...

A boy stood and discretely tucked a tome away into his robes, leaving the great hall and ignoring the few stares at his back. His housemates still didn't understand him; he was an enigma to them, and that was perfectly fine. A half-blood that grew up with abusive muggles, I'm not exactly easy for a pureblood to figure out even if I felt like being social. He thought, sighing.

His feet led him on a long, meandering path through the hallways of the great castle. Usually at this time he'd find an abandoned classroom and practice his magic, or at least the spells he dared use within these halls. Now however, he felt a certain listlessness – it had been some time since he'd explored the castle. Wouldn't hurt to find a new spot to read, anyway. He thought, moving up a few floors and walking along an outer hallway; open air and dark night dominated his left.

He gazed impassively at the twinkling stars for a long moment – reflecting, repressing. I have far too many issues to think overly long like this. His thoughts muttered, forcing him to turn and head deeper into the castle. He walked aimlessly, fingering the spine of the tome he carried hidden beneath his robes. It was a book on minor dark arts, not exactly illegal but most certainly to be found in the Restricted Section if it were ever allowed into Hogwarts at all. He'd bought it during his very first trip to Diagon Alley after slipping away from his escort.

Long years in the Dursleys' household had taught him to be wary and to question the motives of everyone. From so-called family that despised his very existence to muggle teachers that never interceded on his behalf despite it being their duty, no, he had no cause for trusting anyone. And so, he had explored the darker elements of this new world on his own.

I'm reflecting again... he thought with a sigh, forcing the memories away for the time being and clutching the book tighter as he passed a few portraits. He came to an intersection, listening as sounds echoed from the hallway to his right. I think I'm close to the Hufflepuff dormitories... he realized, turning the other way and continuing on his silent exploration.

He walked for a ways further, allowing his feet to choose his path. Eventually he came upon a hallway with several doors on either side, likely unused classrooms. Why is that doorknob glowing? The single handle stood out from the rest by a very slight sheen of red-orange. Is it a locking charm, privacy ward, or both? He wracked his mind for possible causes while he stood before the offending door.

Well, it's worth a shot... he thought, unsure where this sudden spike of curiosity originated and hoping it didn't lead him to intruding on some amorous upperclassmen. "Alohomora," he incanted, frowning as the door refused to budge. Maybe the ward has to be dispelled... "Finite," he tried, succeeding with the spell after two attempts and smiling as the red-orange glow dissipated. Another unlocking charm followed, and the door opened silently.

He slipped in and boggled at what he saw. A seventh year by his judgment, dancing left to right as an animated dummy sent a series of spells at her. Her movements were a beautiful, fluid grace that

insured not a single spell from her opponent landed. How is an animated construct casting spells? He wracked his mind for an answer; as he watched however, the balls impacted the wall and floor with no discernible damage or impact. Are they just light? Not actual spells, but illusions? He steeled himself and purposefully stepped into the path of one of them, unable to resist the instinct to close his eyes as the ball impacted his chest... and promptly dissipated. Not even a tingle...

The young woman still hadn't recognized his presence, so he took a moment to study her. Her hair was a mystery, as bright pink was certainly not a natural shade of any race of human or demi-human. As he watched, the colors of it seemed to shift to a more muted color when she failed a dodge only to brighten considerably when her fluid movements dodged successfully. Odd...

Harry contemplated leaving her there, but his damnable curiosity forced him to stay. Yellow highlights on the robes, she's a Hufflepuff... probably won't curse me. He reasoned and gathered himself before clearing his throat loudly. Chaos ensued.

The witch was mid-pirouette when the sound came. All of his previous assertions about her grace went flying out the window as she slipped and face-planted onto the stone floor. The construct continued to happily pelt her back with light spells while she groaned in pain. It took all of Harry's will not to burst into laughter – as it was, he managed to restrain it to a snort.

"Buggering hell that hurt," she grouched, pushing herself up and giving a baleful look to the interloper. "Well? Aren't you going to apologize?" She continued, glaring at the dark-haired youth with annoyance.

"Your warding spells need work. A first year got through them," Harry drawled, adopting the superior attitude he'd cultivated for dealing with in-laws and dorm mates.

She glared at him then, standing and mustering whatever dignity was to be found when one had dusty robes and an errant scrap of parchment stuck to their face. "Yeah well..." she started, frowned, tried to start again and finally let out an explosive sigh. "Was there something you wanted kid?"

"The construct, how does it work?" Harry continued without preamble, walking past her and standing in front of the now-motionless golem, tilting his head from side to side and poking it with his wand.

"Stop fiddling with it!" She snapped, slapping his hand away and giving him a look. "It cost a bloody fortune. It's a training dummy." She continued in a hard voice, the annoyance still clear in her tone.

"Explain," the boy stated, locking his emerald gaze on hers and watching in astonishment as the color of her eyes briefly matched his own before shifting back to a neutral blue. One thing at a time... "How do the enchantments work? What are its capabilities?"

"You're not going to leave me alone, are you?" She asked, frowning as young wizard kept staring at her. "Fine. It's made of wood and it's been enchanted with loads of stuff that lets it move around and whatnot. It can fire simple spells, or it can dodge incoming spells. Trainee aurors use these models; the more high-end ones are made of metal and are quite a bit faster." She finished, obviously hoping to deter the boy – it was not to be.

"I hadn't realized it was possible to animate things permanently..." Harry whispered, speaking his thoughts aloud as he processed her words with Granger-like efficiency. "So you want to be an auror?" the question surprised him, why would he care? And yet, he found himself curious. Maybe she can give me some pointers for the next time I get caught out by errant Gryffindors... he reasoned.

"Not that it's any of your business... but yes," She muttered, finally sitting down on a desk and leaning back to appraise the boy in front of her. "Snape might just cost it for me with the potions NEWT, but I'm still gonna try. Bloody git." She muttered, just loud enough for her audience to hear.

Harry frowned at her – Snape was his head of house, but he supposed he could understand her feelings. He was never very fond of me either, despite being my house head... he mused, cocking his head and assessing the young woman in front of him. "Wouldn't a shield spell work just as well?" Harry queried.

"Yeah for one or two hits, but those things get tiring to hold up. Plus, your enemy isn't always gonna be flinging little light charms at you,

yeah?" She asked, scoffing. "It's best to learn to move and dodge, and there's supposed to be an entire course in the auror academy for non-magical defense."

He took the scoff as a personal offense, glaring. "Perhaps you should have it cast some real spells then, to give you some proper motivation." Harry all but growled.

"Easy tiger," she laughed, suddenly grinning at him and asking, "That an offer?"

What? "What?" he queried, surprised.

"I said, are you offering to help me? You got through those door wards, so I'm assuming you can cast more than a little levitation charm," she stated, grinning wider now. He watched transfixed as her hair grew from a darker pink to an almost silvery color. She's so confusing...

"What exactly do you want me to do? And what's in it for me?" Harry fired back, crossing his arms over his chest and giving her his best impassive look.

Her hair color dimmed a bit. "Don't do that, you remind me of a hook-nosed git," she teased, then grew more serious. "You know the stinging hex?" she waited for his nod, "use that, you'll be harder to predict than the dummy. As for what ya get in return... I'll show you a few spells, yeah?"

The gleam in the boy's eyes must have been too telling, for she immediately frowned. "Nothing too dangerous, but I can show you how to do a typical stunner and maybe help you with those shields you like so much, eh?"

Harry mulled over her words for a moment and finally nodded. "Fair enough," he murmured, walking forward as she stood and offering a hand, "Harry Potter."

She smiled back at him and reached forward to ruffle his hair instead, "Wotcher Harry, name's Tonks. Just Tonks."

Her hand in his hair began to slow before the swaying dark strands finally went completely still. I looked between them at the smiling

face of Tonks and the surprisingly mirrored expression on the younger boy before her. I realized suddenly that I was smiling as well, my expression matching the others.

Tonks and I had trained together after our accord that evening. My accuracy with spells had risen sharply from the efforts, and she had praised me on more than one occasion. After she got over the stinging... I thought with mirth. It had started as a strictly professional endeavor for the betterment of our individual skills.

Over time however, we'd grown closer – more than once I'd found myself in our usual training spot patting her back awkwardly as she cried over her latest romantic debacle. Apparently being a metamorph, as I had learned her gifts were called, had its downsides to go with the benefits. I can't believe some fool actually asked her to look like McGonagall... I shivered, that had been a particularly long evening.

Eventually we had been forced to drift apart as her NEWTs approached, though we had tried to meet at least once a week. These meetings usually devolved into me reading her trainee auror books while she frantically read through her school texts, but still – it had been nice to have a friend. Actually... she was probably the only one I had my entire first year, I realized.

After Tonks graduated, she had kept in touch sporadically through letters. I recalled with a smile the nearly-ineligible letter she'd sent gushing over having been chosen as an apprentice to some senior auror named Alastor Moody. Constant Vigilance! her later letters had complained. The thought of Tonks' status drew a frown to my face as I recalled the events that led to my unconsciousness.

Tonks was still a trainee Auror, why had she been there? I recalled a letter that she had written explaining trainee Aurors usually accompanied experienced mentors for mundane field work to gain experience. Well, as far as they knew it was a simple, if excessive, underage magic charge at first... I mused, slowly walking out of the memory and back into the familiar environs of my mind.

Tonks had really wanted to go on some of those field assignments, too... I remembered suddenly. The thought made me feel sick, and for the first time I cursed the fact I was stuck in my mindscape and unable to commit to the wrenching that I so desperately wished to do.

I slammed a fist into a wall instead and watched it crumble in face of my wrath.

Turning my gaze to the dark skies above, I walked out of the western 'wing' of my thoughts and into a dilapidated courtyard. The fire's still spreading. It was true; twilight flame had consumed almost the entire sky above me and cast a shadow over my entire mindscape. "At least you're staying up there," I quipped, likely tempting fate.

Suddenly, the flames began to swirl directly above my head. Fuck me. I thought savagely, watching as the fire churned like some parody of a whirlpool. It began to lower, lengthening into a funnel shape directly towards me. A part of me told me to run, told me to escape before the nebulous tornado could claim me – but I refused to listen. As far as I was concerned it already had me, body and soul.

"Come to collect your dues?" I mocked to the maelstrom of fire above me. "13 minutes of freedom you gave me, after all," I continued, stepping up onto a broken stair just to put me that much closer. "Though I must confess, it didn't turn out quite how I expected. I suppose that's just how you work, hmm?" I taunted. Even a week ago, I would likely have considered myself mad if shown this situation. Perhaps I am.

The flames roared brighter, dusting the ruins around me in a layer of frost and devouring warmth. I stood in the center of the pillar as it widened; as I watched, a tunnel formed above me through the fire. I spread my arms wide and welcomed the frigid inferno, welcomed the contradiction, welcomed the darkness.

Suddenly the conflagration was upon me, embracing me with twilight flame. It doesn't hurt... why doesn't it hurt? I thought, suddenly feeling my mental self lurch upwards. The dark blaze propelled me towards the sky with more and more speed, towards the still-opaque barriers. I braced myself and brought my arms before my face just before I struck the shields of my mind. They shattered like glass before a muggle cannon...

I awoke suddenly, sitting bolt upright and looking around with wide-eyes. It took me several moments to push down the panic and confusion and take stock of my situation. What... what was that? I asked rhetorically, fearing even to hazard a guess as to what I'd just

experienced. Hastily, I checked my occlumency shields and found them whole, if a bit worse for wear given my predicament.

My predicament indeed... I thought with a trace of amusement, looking around at the small cell I was sequestered within. My lower back still ached, ached where my spine had broken and I realized I must have been out for some time – and bore the attentions of a healer during that period.

I patted myself down, finding I was still garbed in over-large jeans and a simple T-shirt that fell far past my waist. My wand had of course been taken, as had the watch Ginny had given me. It was hard to tell which I missed more at the moment.

Slowly I stood, wincing as pain stabbed at my back. How long are you supposed to stay immobile after breaking your spine, anyway? I thought curiously, but seeing as I had no idea just how long I had been unconscious it mattered little. I stood for a moment and stretched the muscles that I dared; my mouth was dry and the aftertaste of mold was prevalent. Nutrient potion. Probably been out longer than a day, for certain.

I approached the door of the cell and looked through the small, barred window. I assumed it was a holding cell within the ministry, as I spotted a drowsy Auror sitting at a small table nearby. I assessed him for a long moment, he appeared rather young – likely a trainee, there simply to raise alarm if something happened so that more seasoned veterans could deal with the breach. As it was, I wondered what god I had pleased to bless me with such luck not once, but twice. Will they ever learn not to underestimate me?

As if sensing my gaze, the man turned his drowsy eyes to my cell bars. He must have noticed appraising stare, for he suddenly stood and blinked at me. "You're supposed to be out... they re-stunned you just an hour ago!" He exclaimed, and I cocked my head at him as I considered his words.

"Then whoever did it is obviously incompetent," I retorted dryly, leaning against the cell door and resting my chin just beneath the bars. It irritated me that I had to stand on my tip-toes to look out.

"Mad-eye... erm, I mean, Senior Auror Moody himself stunned you!" the man retorted, and I blinked. I should be out for quite some time,

hell even the stunners Tonks taught me were sufficient to put someone under for over three hours... I thought, recalling a particular few Gryffindors who had served to test that duration.

"Why have I been kept unconscious?" I asked, pushing aside the issue of my rapid recovery and focusing instead on the situation at hand.

"Orders," he replied shortly, apparently getting over the shock of my sudden bout of consciousness and recalling that I was, in fact, his prisoner.

"Why haven't I been kissed?" I asked next; I felt it was a legitimate question. He seemed uncomfortable with the query. What, the thought of a 13-year-old being executed doesn't sit well with you? I mentally scoffed.

"Your trial is scheduled for tomorrow," he finally replied, shifting his gaze to the papers on his desk before looking back at me and beginning to approach my cell, "Now, go lie down on the cot so I can stun you again."

What a ridiculous command, I thought, glaring balefully at the fool before me. I looked into his brown eyes and realized that if I was put under again now, I couldn't trust my capacity to recover so quickly again. I would be out until the trial, I would be sentenced, I would be executed...

A pleasant numbness danced up my vertebrae.

I smiled then as I looked into those approaching eyes. "No," I murmured simply, reaching out with my mind and trying to form the connection. Legilimency was an art I had tested a sum total of three times, all with Ginny and never in this fashion... and always with a wand.

Thoughts of Ginny's smiling face during our study sessions made the cold recede; it made it harder to hold my focus on his eyes. Instead, I thought of her pale lifeless body lying on the floor of a forgotten chamber. The chill returned and bathed my insides, my soul, with vindictive rime and searing twilight.

He raised his wand to stun me and I glared at him hatefully, wreathing my will in dark flame and striking. I felt myself flying forward, propelled by the same blaze that had brought my consciousness. I slammed into the rudimentary occlumency shields he had with a fury not to be denied, and soon the fire was spreading along his insides. I saw his blank gaze and smirked as he visibly shivered.

"We have to escape this place..." I whispered into the halls of his mind; I knew better than to try direct domination in such a manner and I had no wand for the Imperius. Instead, I focused on implanting a suggestion within his mind to provoke a response. "They're keeping us here. They're going to kill us. Give me my wand and we'll get out of here together."

Our wills warred on the plane of his thoughts. He seemed torn, his blank gaze never leaving my own eyes. I saw a flash of a cabinet, a cabinet containing wands. My wand! "Get it for me and we can escape!" He was rebelling, but the dark fire – my dark fire – would not be denied. His shivers grew more pronounced, and I repeated the command in a growl.

Slowly he began to backpedal, stumbling over the table though his eyes seemed locked onto mine. He fumbled behind him for the cabinet and tapped his wand on the wards, opening it and pulling out three wands from within. I recognized one as my holly and phoenix feather. "That one, yes!"

He walked back towards my cell with a mechanical gait. I reached through the bars then, outstretching my arm towards him. "Almost there... just hand it here, and we'll be free..." I cooed. The Auror raised my wand towards me slowly. Almost...

A blue curse struck my open palm at speed, slamming my forearm into the bars of my cell and snapping them audibly along with most of the bones in my hand. I screamed in pain and stumbled back into my cell; the black flame hastily returned me into my own mind and wreathed itself around me in a protective cocoon.

"I told you he's to stay stunned, Richards!" a familiar voice rumbled just before the crack of staff meeting skull reached my ears.

"Ow! Wha... Mad-Eye?" I heard the auror reply, his voice dazed as if he'd just woken from a deep sleep. "I-I mean, S-Senior Auror Moody!" he corrected moments later. Apparently he had recovered enough to remember his audience.

"This is going on your record," the gruff voice, who I now knew as Alastor Moody, growled and stepped up to the bars. I looked at his gnarled face hatefully while cradling my shattered right arm. "Nice try lad, don't know how you did it and frankly I don't care. You're going back under."

"Wait!" I tried, only to stumble forward as a thick bolt of crimson energy struck my chest and rent my consciousness asunder.

I awoke chained to a chair in the center of a large hall. Courtroom... I corrected, glancing around. There was a tingle running through my nerves, causing my fingers and toes to twitch. I must have been enervated.

"The trial shall now commence. Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore, presiding," an official voice sounded from somewhere behind me and to the right.

"Harry Potter," a voice called from in front of me, and I glanced up and gazed at my old headmaster as he sat on his dais with the entire assembled Wizengamot flanking him. I had to forcibly restrain the black fire that surged inside of me at the sight.

"You stand accused of 3 counts of murder of a muggle, 2 counts of murder of an Auror," Two? I thought I killed three... "Additionally, you are accused of using multiple Unforgivable and other illegal dark curses in the course of these acts. How do you plead?" Dumbledore asked, the sorrow in his eyes nearly made me sick. I snorted instead.

"Not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect," I replied, recalling the defense from some muggle crime drama I'd overheard while scrubbing the Dursley's floors a few years prior.

"I see," Albus started, frowning at me. "You see Harry..."

"Hem-hem!" A nasally voice interrupted, and I cast my gaze into the sea of black robes for the source.

"While I do agree insanity makes for a likely—"

"Hem-hem!"

"...yes, Senior Under-Secretary?" Albus finally acknowledged, giving the woman in question a mild glare.

"Such a defense is not credible under Ministry guidelines, sir," she murmured in what was likely supposed to be a sweet voice, but the dark fire inside of me seethed and was joined by my own anger. I located her finally, as she had not been among the assembled Wizengamot above. No, she was standing just beneath their podiums as acting prosecutor for the ministry. I committed her face to memory.

"Thank you, Madam Umbridge," Umbridge. The Chief Warlock replied, though even I could tell his words were slightly forced. "Do you have any other words to say before the trial commences, Harry?" Dumbledore finished.

I smiled then, leaning back and rapping my fingers – freshly healed, though still stiff – on the reinforced wooden chair that bound me. "It doesn't matter, this trial is a farce just like this Ministry," I offered, casting an amused look to the pink woman from earlier. She apparently didn't like my choice of words, judging by the scowl that briefly broke her sugary smile.

"Very well..."

In all, the trial lasted about an hour. They brought in aurors to testify against me, most of them I recognized from that fateful night. 13 minutes!

The first auror was the one I shot with my uncle's shotgun. He didn't appear worse for wear at all. Of course, muggle firearms don't exactly leave trace dark magic that complicate healing... I thought with a slight smirk. He saw the smirk and nearly drew his wand.

The second and perhaps most shocking was an auror that was missing about half of his face. It was covered in white gauze that disappeared down his robes to his right shoulder and glistened with blue-white wisps of enchantment. I recognized him with a start – he

had arrived near Tonks, and I had struck him with an acid-burst curse. I had thought him dead. His testimony was damning, if brief.

Finally, Senior Auror Moody himself took the stand. I didn't bother hiding my snort when his peg-leg got caught on the edge of the stand. It got me silenced for the duration of his testimony.

Why didn't they bring in Tonks? I was curious yet thankful; I truly didn't think I could face her again. Better I get kissed without seeing her – maybe she'll remember me as I was back in first year... I thought sadly.

"Does the prosecution rest?" Dumbledore queried after Moody had ambled off and a few other investigating aurors had testified to the state of the Dursleys. One had even vomited during his testimony on the state of Petunia Dursley and I laughed openly, wondering who had paid him for the performance – that got me silenced again.

"We do, Chief Warlock," Umbridge replied smugly, sitting down in her seat and giving me her little sugary grin. Twilight flame consumed my thoughts, but I restrained it. Aurors were behind me, flanking me, more by the doors... it would be pointless to fight now – better instead to bide my time.

"Do you have any words in your defense, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, though I could tell he probably didn't want me to speak. The silencing charm on me was lifted, and I gave him my best grin.

"It was worth it," I murmured simply, but there was cause for my barb. I wanted to weaken his shields; I wanted one last parting shot at the old man...

He frowned deeply, and let out a shuddering sigh. I spotted the glint of tears in his eyes and hid my grin as I gathered the dark inferno within me. "You leave me no choice, Harry. Those in favor—" I struck with vengeance.

I poured all of my frustration into that attack. I gathered all my hate, all my sorrow, every single sin I could gather from my memory and threw it into the pyre. The raging inferno that gripped me eclipsed thought and reason, and I charged into his mind on blackened wings of most unholy flame. Pristine white shields greeted me as I rapidly

approached, and I slammed into them with a fury born of desperation and a lifetime of suffering.

The shields were strong, so strong, and yet the hate within me surged onwards. Frost encased the shimmering barrier as the fire raged against it, raged against one of my perceived tormentors. I slammed the mental equivalent of a fist into the bright alabaster before me, licks of black flame expelling from my claw with each strike. Claw?

For a single moment, the shield buckled. A hairline of cracks formed beneath my strikes, and a single fragment dislodged...

The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...

A prophecy? My mind whirled with the knowledge and my concentration faltered. The gleaming shields flared to brilliance suddenly and I screamed as I was violently ejected on a silver wind. Twilight flame wrapped around me and defended me from the worst, but I knew there would be damage to my mindscape after this.

"Enough!" Dumbledore was livid, though I didn't bother looking up at his face. I hung my head and fought the headache he'd sparked inside of me. There was clamor in the Wizengamot now, and I heard some unknown voice calling for order.

Why is he thinking about a prophecy during my trial? What's the significance? It was so hard to focus now, the black fire had dimmed from my defeat and my occlumency shields were fractured heavily.

"All in favor of conviction?" Dumbledore finally asked; his voice was cold. I didn't bother to look at the show of hands.

"Harry Potter, the Wizengamot finds you guilty of all charges," the Chief Warlock intoned with the voice of a judge passing sentence – which he was. "As you have not yet reached your majority, your sentence is commuted to life in Azkaban." ...what?

Footsteps approached and stopped in front of me; I recognized the hem of the robes as the dark blue of the Auror corps. I heard a sudden snapping sound and sighed as I beheld two pieces of a broken wand fall to the floor before me. Eleven inches, holly and phoenix feather...

"Aurors, remove the defendant," a female voice stated, the same one who had called for order earlier. I was bodily lifted to my feet and had my arms bound behind me. I walked mechanically as I was led from the room, my thoughts still reeling from my mental battle and the knowledge that I had been spared the kiss.

There were reporters outside the courtroom, of course. I paid them no mind, my eyes cast down to the shackles on my feet. What was that prophecy about, why was he thinking about it during my trial? It makes no sense... I was thinking frantically now. I hardly noticed when a reporter reached through the throng of aurors and grabbed my shoulder, nor did I pay any mind when Moody rapped him on the head with his staff.

We walked directly into what I supposed was a holding area. Finally wrestling the headache down from a splitting pain to a dull throb, I risked a glance upwards and immediately faltered. Tonks...

She was standing in front of me with tears in her eyes, and I found to my horror they were contagious. Words spilled from my lips without the approval of my mind, "Tonks... I'm sorry..." I wasn't sorry for the murders. I wasn't sorry for the 13 minutes of freedom bought with blood. No, I was sorry for bringing her into my life and holding her close enough that she was harmed by my actions, no matter how justified I felt them to be.

She sighed quietly and sniffled, and I tried to offer her a wan smile, "You'll need a new training partner," I offered, trying to remind her of better days, of days before a flight of independence landed her friend in a cage for the rest of his life, of days before black fire consumed the last vestiges of my battered soul.

My words must have struck a nerve, for suddenly the dam behind her will broke. She lurched at me and wrapped me tightly in her arms, and I pressed my face into her chest as she began to sob in earnest. Sudden warmth bloomed within me and dispelled the cold. I was unable to suppress a gasp.

"I'm sorry too..." she whispered into my hair, "Oh God, Harry I'm so sorry..." I leaned into her, wishing the restraints were removed from my wrists so I could return the embrace. I inhaled deeply of her scent, the lilacs of her perfume mingling with what I could only

define as her. She smelled of earthen things, with a crispness normally found on chilly mornings. Autumn...

"That's enough, Nymphadora. We have orders," the voice was Moody's, "and you have to report to Madam Bones for your disciplinary hearing. Just forget the lad exists, he's going to join his kind," he finished in a voice dripping with disdain.

His words made me tense, and not just from indignation. She was the only one there that night that wasn't at my trial... I felt her tense and take a breath to defend me and immediately interrupted her, "Tonks, you didn't have to..." I started.

She shushed me with a shuddering breath and hugged me tighter. "I refused to testify, they can bugger off," she replied, finally drawing away from me as Moody impatiently tapped his staff on the floor.

"I'll be alright," I offered in an attempt to reassure her and she suddenly laughed through her tears.

"Only you would say something like that..." she began to tear up again and reached forward to ruffle my hair in a familiar gesture. "I'll see you later, kay?"

It was my turn to laugh, "You better not!" I replied seriously, drawing another smile from her - though this one was tinged with sadness.

"I said that's enough," Moody rumbled, and his stave impacted the back of my head. I turned and snarled at him, a torrent of black fire rose and bore me forward into the auror's mind. A granite wall greeted me, stretching infinitely in all directions. I was still weak from Dumbledore and the attack was paltry at best, but it served my purposes. I slammed my claw into the stone and watched as a spider web of cracks spread from the impact moments before I fell back into my own body.

"Constant Vigilance, old man!" I sneered, grinning savagely as he stumbled back. Raw fury consumed his remaining eye as he raised his staff.

"Harry!" Tonks cried just as the thick bolt of a stunner slammed into my breast, and I fell back into her arms.

A/N: This chapter is part two of the prologue, which will consist of three chapters total by my estimate.

Please read and review.

Prologue III

The first thing I noticed when I awoke was the smell of salt.

Traces of black fire licked the edges of my vision when my eyelids parted, and I realized to what I owed my recovery. Glancing around, I noticed I was on a small boat. Waves rocked me; waves from a sea I only now realized appeared in the midst of a storm. It's... freezing. It truly was, frost misted my breath and the spray of seawater froze on the sides of my craft.

I was shackled to this small boat by my hands and feet, which were numb with cold. I couldn't see over the rim of the boat's hull. They bound me inside of it... I realized, noting the multiple sheens of blues and reds that crisscrossed the wooden structure. Reinforcement charms, imperturbables...

A wave crested and the boat rocked, dipping down hard to stern and giving me a view of the horizon – that was when I saw it. Azkaban.

It was a vision of madness. Twisted spires of blackened stone were reinforced with the dull sheen of some dark blue metal that spread over them in chaotic designs. The outline of the fortress was a pale, ethereal violet that stood out starkly against the overcast sky and all but screamed of the protective wards that lay wreathed around the entire structure. Gothic arches stretched between spires, dotted with massive demonic gargoyles whose eyes tracked my approach impassively.

A sudden, strange thought flitted into my mind as I beheld the sight. This is the second time I've seen a castle in my life, and both times were by boat... For some reason the thought brought a chuckle to my throat. The sound was alien in such a place.

The chill intensified, and I felt the charms that had been propelling the boat begin to fail. What happens now? I'm still in the sea... am I going to be left to drift? I couldn't really tell how I felt about the choice between dying to exposure or facing the horrors within the twisted halls of this ancient structure before me.

I was saved from having to dwell over-long on my predicament by a sudden chill that permeated my being, cutting into me far deeper than the simple cold of the northern seas. The black flame within my

mind receded while doors to my memory rattled deep within the ruins of my mindscape. Dementors...

A black shadow drifted over my vessel, formless and wreathed in a cloak of purest shadow. A skeletal hand exited the cloak and grasped a chain above my head that I could only guess tied to the bow of the boat. It's dragging me to shore... I realized, taking a shuddering breath and steeling myself for the arrival by tightening my occlumency shields.

Some moments later I found myself walking through a hallway, stumbling to keep up with the wraith from earlier. My arms were bound before me, a metal chain connecting to them and extending into the hand of the dementor that led me.

"I had expected aurors here, you know," I murmured, truly doubting my escort would be one for conversation yet I needed the noise. I needed something human in this place. I had begun to wonder if I was the only one of my kind here, here in this nexus of suffering.

The creature remained silent, dragging me through several stone archways and up so many flights of stairs that I lost count. I stumbled more than once, banging my knees on the stone. My escort was uncaring for my plight, tugging harder on the chain whenever I lagged behind and often sending me sprawling to the ground anew.

"I had also expected other prisoners, surely I'm not the only murderer in the world," my disdain was palpable, but again I truly doubted the wraith noticed or cared. Presently we entered a small hallway and our gait slowed. I was thankful for the reprieve, looking around at the darkened stone and frowning. There should be people here, I know there are people here...

We stopped before a large door of the same dark blue metal from outside the structure. I wracked my brain for the identity of the substance. Dark blue, seems to absorb light judging by the dull sheen, likely magically resistant if used in a wizard's prison... It hit me then, and I stared in wonder. Adamantium... I had no time to dwell on my discovery however, as my warden succeeded in opening the lock.

We stepped through into hell. My ears popped when we entered the room, the telltale sign of crossing a silencing ward. Screams... so many screams... They were deafening. Cells lined both walls on either side of the large hall before us. In each doorway stood a dementor, beyond which could be found a prisoner shriveled in a corner. Some twitched, some moaned, others clawed at the air – most just screamed.

This is... horrible... I thought, shivering for the first time and not from the cold. My warden guided me along one of the walls and I turned as I heard a dull thump from within a nearby cell. It was the only cell without a dementor standing before it, and I tugged on the chain that led me as I tried to peer at the occupant. To my surprise, my warden stopped and allowed me my curiosity.

I stepped closer to the bars, spotting an emaciated man standing near the back of the small stone cage. His head was rhythmically striking the wall, over and over and over as the rest of his body stood rigidly still. "H-hello?" I tried, hating the stutter but unable to stifle it. The man ignored me, continuing to strike his skull against the unyielding stone. Blood stained the wall and trickled down to the floor.

I watched him, a sinking feeling settling into my stomach that I couldn't place. "Hello? A-are you alright?" It was a fool's query considering our setting, but I could think of no other words. Slowly the man turned towards me and I caught his eyes. I dove into his thoughts hoping to glean some information on this place... but I found nothing. Nothing.

This is impossible... not even Dumbledore is great enough of an occlumens to completely hide his mind, that's absolutely impossible! Something should... my thoughts stopped. The chill within my soul settled deep into my breast, and it wasn't the comforting numbness of ebon flame. No, this was the frigid grip of horror – this was fear. He's soulless... there's nothing there... he's been kissed...

I stumbled away from the cell and retched, falling to my knees and expelling the bile in my stomach in dry heaves onto the cold stone floor. My warden began to tug on my chain but I couldn't muster the strength to stand; instead, I let him drag me over the ragged floors. My gray prison robes caught and tore in several places, but I didn't care. I could hardly think.

That could be my fate... nothing, nothing there... his soul was ripped out and now there's nothing there... My thoughts were coming faster now as pricks of hysteria tested my occlumency shields and chiseled away at the smallest imperfections. Whatever was left was just pounding his head on that wall... was he trying to find some feeling? Trying to feel pain, something to tell him he was alive? Panic was gripping me, closing around my heart with frostbitten fingers.

I was snapped from my reverie when I was unceremoniously thrown into a cell. I rolled with the throw, coming to rest against the back wall and managing to sit up under my own power. There in the doorway of the cell stood my warden, the very same wraith that had met my boat down far below in the surf. My chains fell away and I stood immediately, squaring off with the dark shadow before me.

I wanted to make some type of witty comment, inject some bit of levity in an attempt to regain some small scrap of control over the situation. I wanted to taunt this creature, to tell him he would have to pay dearly if he wanted my soul. I called to my twilight flame, called to it to infuse my will and grant me strength to face this abomination. Nothing came.

The doors to my memory rattled harder in my mind as I stared at the creature before me; sudden panic bound my heart in sheets of ice and squeezed. I backpedaled, pressing against the wall of stone behind me. "S-stay away from me..." I was trembling now. The flame abandoned me... no, it wouldn't...

A sudden force struck my occlumency shields and pierced them like a cutting curse through parchment. My mindscape trembled, doors shattered within their frames, and I fell into a stream of unbound memory...

I landed hard on my knees onto warm wooden floors. Slowly I cast my eyes around the room, frowning immediately as I noticed how... indistinct the environment appeared. Blurry... usually only happens in my earliest memories...

That was when I heard the scream, and the thundering footsteps on the stairs. No, not this one...

A woman burst into the room and ran for the crib – my crib. She was nearly hysterical. "Sirius... get here soon..." she was whispering; I noticed a faint white glow fading on her wand tip, the sign of a recently cast patronus. The woman – mother – glanced back to the door before rushing to it and slamming it shut. Nearly half a dozen wards shot from her wand in rapid succession, just as I heard the first sounds of spellfire from downstairs.

I don't want to remember this... I tried to leave the memory. I focused on my mindscape, pulling back with all of my will but it was for naught. I turned, slamming my hands onto the walls of the memory but only succeeded in tiring myself – someone, something was sapping my strength and forcing me to witness it all anew.

There was a thundering crash from beneath and then soft footfalls ascended the stairs. My mother turned just as the doorway imploded, screaming and spreading her body wide over the crib as splinters and shards of wood rained through the room.

"Stand aside and give me the boy," a silky voice drawled, and she turned and leveled her wand.

"You're not taking Harry!" Her voice was shaky but the resolve shined through – I felt a stirring of pride.

"Then you'll die with him," the Dark Lord murmured simply, raising his wand...

She didn't even fight it – to this day I don't understand why. She murmured something softly under her breath moments before the killing curse struck her stomach and rent her soul asunder. I noticed her wand flash, but the spell apparently failed as she stumbled back and screamed my name with her last breath.

Pain stabbed at my heart. It hurt me to view this memory, hurt me far more than any memory I had – perhaps because it was the earliest memory I could recall. Occlumency had given it more detail; it had allowed me to remember more of the finer points of the entire event. Why did you let him kill you mother? You had time, surely we could have escaped somehow...

"Foolish mudblood whore," the Dark Lord muttered; apparently he was as surprised as I was over the lack of fight. I'm going to kill you,

Tom... I thought quietly to myself, focusing on the anger rather than the loss. The memory didn't hurt as badly as it once did, but it still tore deeply into my heart. I've gone this far... might as well watch the rest. I thought, steeling myself and returning my attention to the memory.

Slowly, Voldemort approached my crib and I felt the sting of revulsion at the smirk on his face. The cocky bastard actually leaned over my crib and cast the Dark Mark outside the open window behind me. "One less challenge to my reign..." he whispered, raising his wand towards me and starting a familiar incantation.

It was right at this moment that the window to my nursery exploded inward. A muggle motorcycle – a flying muggle motorcycle – crashed through the window and slammed into the Dark Lord, knocking him across the room and through a wall to fall down into what I supposed was a conservatory beyond. My godfather, Sirius Black, landed in a roll and gave a very dog-like snarl towards the hole in the wall. He turned and stared at the body of my mother, slumped on the ground near my crib. "Lily... no..." he whispered, tears had already formed in his eyes. He must have seen the body of my father outside.

"W-we've gotta get you out of here, pup..." he whispered, gathering the child's body into his arms just as another muted explosion shook the house to its foundations. A plume of flame and noxious smoke poured from beyond the hole in the wall. "Nothing else for it, hold on!" He pushed the child against his back and flicked his wand. Sticking charm... I recognized the wand motion now.

He dove from the window just as a ball of sickly green flew past and impacted the crib, dissolving the wood in acid. Moments before he struck the ground, his flesh shifted and a large black dog took the impact. A baby was stuck to its back as it sprinted across the front lawn, weaving from side to side as dark curses impacted and tore furrows into the ground around him. I smiled when he reached the edge of the wards and apparated them both to safety.

The memory fell away as its focus departed, but I knew the rest from a combination of scraps of information and conjecture.

My godfather had taken me to Hogwarts and given me to the care of Dumbledore. There he had been informed of a simultaneous attack

on the Longbottoms and he'd left to intervene despite the old man's objections and warnings.

He hadn't foreseen that the Dark Lord, furious with his failure at Godric's Hollow, would have gone to join the assault on Longbottom Manor. From what I learned, it had been Rodolphus Lestranger that had struck the killing blow on Sirius Black.

The Dark Lord had of course insisted on slaying the Longbottom boy himself. His ego would allow for nothing less than to personally murder a defenseless child, after all... However, on casting the killing curse something had gone wrong – something that defied all logic and rules of magic. Voldemort had been destroyed that night and at the hands of a near-squib child.

Rage suffused me at the memory of that night, rage that warred with the loss. Neville Longbottom, hero of the wizarding world, Boy-Who-Lived... so many died, and some spoiled brat survives? There is no justice in this world. But then again, I knew that already. It had been beaten into me for 12 years after that night.

Dumbledore had been the one to take me to the Dursleys. I remembered that, because I could remember playing with his beard on the front step of #4 Privet Drive. He had taken me to live in hell. I'm going to repay you for that, old man... I'm going to pay you back for every single sin against me!

The rage was building within me, but it was not to be. The memory shifted and I was forced to watch my mother die again. And again... and again...

Finally, the stream of memory was interrupted. I fell back into my physical body, shivering uncontrollably from a combination of the cold and the loss. I was curled in a fetal position in a corner of the cell, and my throat felt raw. I've been screaming, then...

It took me some time to gather myself. My mind was damaged; broken shards of dark glass littered the wasteland while the ruins that had once held my memories were utterly destroyed. Golden strands of my past flitted about on unseen winds, causing those that drifted too close to my consciousness to give me flashes of remembered suffering. Raped... my mind has been raped... I could think of no other word to describe it.

I opened my eyes blearily and spotted a single vial sitting in the center of my cell. Mustering what was left of my strength I dragged myself towards it. Dark green... murky... my thoughts ran like molasses at this point, slow and ponderous. Probably a nutrient potion... but the dosage is so small... I swallowed it, pushing my tongue into the vial to get the last mold-tasting drop. Of course they wouldn't feed us real food, they won't even give us the pleasure of taste...

My warden was nowhere to be found. I looked at the entrance to my cell, yet he was simply gone. The adamantine bars were wide open. He didn't even bother to lock me in... I realized, yet I couldn't muster the strength to move towards the perceived freedom. Of course not... better to tempt us with a way to escape... I thought darkly, feeling the familiar stirrings of rage before the kindling flame was swallowed by hopelessness. I'm going to die here... No, I have to stay strong...

I closed my eyes and awaited the return of my tormentor.

Five months, by my guessing.

It was hard to judge the passage of time in such a place as this, but I'd begun to count the cycles of my warden's appearance and disappearance. Each day he would torment me for what seemed an eternity before disappearing and leaving the single half-dose of nutrient potion. My reprieve would last for some short time, usually long enough to recover some semblance of my psyche before he returned and tore it all down anew.

Slowly I had begun to recover faster. I had learned how to rebuild my broken mind, how to focus my will despite the pain and loss. I can't let myself be beaten... I thought, narrowing my eyes as I pushed myself to my knees in the cell. I have to escape this place... I forced myself slowly towards my feet before my unused muscles failed me and sent me sprawling back to the floor. No use...

No. A familiar stirring of anger blossomed in me and I grasped onto it like a lifeline. Just because the flame abandoned me doesn't mean I'm an invalid! I snarled into my thoughts and heaved myself to my feet with effort, resting a hand against the cold stone to steady

myself. Slowly, I walked towards the open bars of my cell and past them into the large, empty hall beyond.

There was nothing in the central area other than dusty stone and dried bloodstains. I continued to feel my way along the wall, hissing as I spotted a warden return and fly through a window high above. He saw me, but I realized he was not my warden – though I knew not how I could tell. I had a feeling I could recognize my personal tormentor anywhere.

Keeping one eye upon the dementor above me, I slowly began to cross the hall. The large doors I had entered from were now bound in adamantium once again, so I did not bother to inspect them. Instead I walked to the other row of cells, hoping to find some other inmate who was blessed with my gift of recovery. Perhaps they know of a way to escape...

I found many prisoners curled up in a corner of their cells, but none of them would respond to my queries. My voice was dry and parched with disuse; it quickly gave out after just three stunted, one-sided conversations with my fellow inmates. The wardens will be back soon... I anticipated, dragging myself slowly back to my cell and frowning as I spotted a shadow in the corner.

"This is my cell," I whispered, it was all my voice would allow. I saw the shadow shift, realizing it was not true darkness but merely a long curtain of ebony hair. A pair of violet eyes glistened slightly in the low light, and I saw them slowly swim into focus onto me.

"It was... vacant," the voice was feminine, and I narrowed my eyes. In my experience, the female snakes at Hogwarts were often the most dangerous.

"I was out. Its mine," If pressed I wouldn't be able to say why I felt so possessive of the site of my torture, yet there was a certain familiarity with the cracked stone walls that helped to bring me a small measure of security.

"I like new cells. It's like going to a whole new world..." her voice was strange, possessing a distant quality that made it sound as if she were far away. Her eyes, however, were cold and hard. They were the eyes of a realist, the eyes of someone who had suffered

and granted suffering in equal measure. They were my eyes, reflecting back at me with age and violet hue. Into a mirror, darkly...

"I doubt the wardens will let us share," I muttered dryly, though honestly I was past caring. I was tired from my stunted exploration. In truth, it had been more motion than I had performed in nearly the entire five months I had been in this hell. Slowly I drug myself over to the wall and collapsed into the corner opposite the other occupant.

"Mmm... they'll separate us when they return. For now though, it's just us..." I shivered at her words, but I convinced myself it was just the cold. "You're a mystery..." I sensed her assessing gaze and restrained the urge to look over at her. Instead, I focused on the wall and gave a noncommittal grunt.

She was undeterred, continuing in her own dry, cracked voice. "Tell me... what did the ickle baby do to get thrown into big, bad Azkaban...?" There was a teasing quality in her voice. That's more emotion than I've heard since I've been here, unless you count the screams... I was surprised that she could muster anything but sorrow, if I was honest.

"I slaughtered three muggles and somehow bungled my way through killing two aurors in the attempted escape," I replied after a moment, unsure why I was being honest but realizing there was no real need to lie. The entire Wizarding World knew of my crimes by now, I was sure.

She suddenly cackled. High-pitched, mad laughter filled our shared cell and likely much of the hallway beyond. I gave her an uneasy look, assessing her as her violet eyes danced with mirth and her emaciated frame shook with her laughter. "Ickle baby murderer!" I narrowed my eyes at her, and she gave me a toothy smile. "It's okay, I am too. Two murderers in a pod!" She spread her arms wide in a gesture to our cell. She's mad. Then again, who am I to judge...?

I turned from her and her mad, cold eyes. Leaning back against the stone, I closed my eyes and tried to find a moment of peace – they were worth more than the fabled ambrosia in a place such as this. I heard a shifting noise to my side and forcibly restrained myself from jumping or giving any other sign of my anxiety. Suddenly something sat down next to me and I drove any warmth from my voice before growling, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting next to the ickle baby murderer so I can see him better!" She snapped, and I shot my eyes to hers in surprise at the sudden fury in her voice. Her eyes flashed once before they regained their mirth from earlier. "Mmm... I don't recognize your eyes. Are you a mudblood?" I glared at her and her words.

"Half-blood. My mother was muggleborn, I have her eyes," I snapped back, for once wishing my warden would return and separate us so the torture could begin anew – at least he was predictable.

She hissed at me slightly when I mentioned my lineage, though she made no move to depart. Instead she leaned in closer and I couldn't resist the instinct to pull away. Her hand shot out like a whip and grabbed my collar, tugging me closer. I tried not to wince at the smell of her breath. Probably not any better than mine...

"Well, I suppose it's no fault of yours that your father married beneath his station," She drawled. I fought down the urge to claw out those violet eyes.

"Don't speak of my mother," I whispered quietly, feeling the familiar stirrings of rage. Ebon flame or not, I'll find a way to kill you if you speak ill of her again... I quietly promised.

The deranged woman stared at me for a long moment, her hand still gripping my collar and our faces inches apart. Suddenly she smiled again, "Mmkay, we'll leave the ickle baby murderer's mudblood mummy out of it." I snarled, and she grinned wider. "So what's his name?" It took me a moment to realize she was asking me for mine.

"Harry Potter," I murmured, hoping that would shut her up. Instead, her eyes widened slightly and a manic grin split her face.

"Ickle Harry murdering Potter! Oh, what would James think!" she cooed, and I stifled the urge to bolt when she suddenly pulled me into an embrace. "Shhh! Don't worry, mummy Bella won't hurt you..." Yet...

The embrace made me distinctly uncomfortable. Best to just go with it... she hasn't been overtly hostile, though I doubt she'd appreciate disagreement... I thought, noticing a smudge on her arm as she

pulled me closer. I leaned forward to inspect it and felt the cold stirring of dread when I made out the image. "You're a Death Eater..." I whispered, giving voice to my realization.

She nodded energetically, pulling me closer. "Mm-hmm! Do you like it? My master's mark is so... beautiful..." Her voice was taking on an even more manic edge, and I had to find some way to head her off before she had a chance to start extolling the virtues of her lord. "Soon, my master will—"

"You said your name was Bella?" I asked quickly, interrupting her.

She gave me a baleful look but slowly nodded. "Bellatrix Lestrangle," She corrected, and I couldn't help but notice she didn't seem as proud of her last name as her first. Lestrangle... I recognized the surname.

"Are you related to Rudol—" She cut me off with a hand over my mouth and a murderous growl.

"Do not speak his name to me!" She hissed, and I blinked in surprise. "My husband and I... do not speak. The wardens keep him in another wing of the prison," She explained, and I noticed her voice seemed to calm. So, she's the wife of my godfather's murderer. Small world.

"How long until the dementors return?" I asked; truthfully I hadn't been here long enough to get their times down completely. I was sure we were getting close, however.

Bella surprised me by pulling me closer and cradling me to her chest. I felt her face press into my hair – it had begun to grow longer. "Not long, ickle Harry..." she whispered, and I heard the stirrings of screams from outside the cell just as I felt my reformed occlumency shields begin to rattle. "Not long at all..."

Time passed, mindscapes crumbled and my will remained unbroken.

"You're not taking Harry!"

I awoke from my recent bout of nightmares and snarled at my warden's retreating back. My mindscape had begun to recover faster until I'd gotten to this point – able to recover swiftly enough to

see the dementor as he left. I snatched up the nutrient potion and downed it in one pull before pulling myself back into a sitting position against the wall to wait.

It never took her long to arrive after that first meeting some months prior. She slowly ambled her way into my cell and collapsed next to me against the wall, sliding down until her head was in my lap. Absently I began to stroke the tangled locks of ebony hair.

We rarely spoke on these occasions. There was a simple comfort in the presence of another, and I believe we both recognized it as simply that and nothing more. Comfort... a rare commodity in a place such as this... I would often think, looking down at her shivering form. Sometimes she would hold me, other times I would hold her. I often wondered how she survived here for so long without this contact, as I'd quickly become dependent. Though I'll never admit it...

"What does ickle Harry plan to do when he escapes?" She asked suddenly, and I cast my gaze down into the tangled mass of dark strands in my lap.

"We're in here for life, Bella," I replied with a snort, and I heard her return an amused one of her own.

"The master will come for me... and my ickle murderer isn't one to stay caged, hmm?" She asked, turning over onto her back and looking up at me. I frowned down into her violet eyes.

"I never should have told you about that night," I muttered and she grinned up at me.

"Why not? It was so... entertaining imagining the old pigeon-lover's face when you cast the killing curse..." She trailed off and I felt a shiver go through her body, likely not from the cold. Sometimes I thought she enjoyed the story of my ill-fated escape from Privet Drive far more than I did.

"What makes you so certain your master will return for you?" I asked, cocking my head down at her. She frowned at me for a moment, and I pressed on. "After all, if the press is to be believed, Longbottom..." we both sneered at the same time, "killed him."

"My master isn't dead..." her voice grew distant. It was perhaps a testament to our relationship that she didn't shriek at me for even mentioning the possibility of Voldemort's demise. "He'll return for his faithful, he'll break this prison... he'll tear it down!" She shrieked suddenly, and I winced. I knew it was coming... "Then we'll kill all of those who wronged us, the mudbloods and the blood traitors... we'll bend this world until it breaks then reform it into a vision of our future..." She was mad, but sometimes I just enjoyed listening to her passionate ravings. They fill the silence, at least...

I made a noncommittal noise and closed my eyes, letting one hand absently run through her hair while the other rested over her stomach. I focused inward, preparing the trap I'd been working on for the better part of the last two months. It's ready... tonight, I think... sudden anticipation filled me, and Bella must have noticed.

"You're planning something," she stated suddenly, pulling me out of my thoughts. I gave her a bored look and she pressed on. "Ickle Harry is a plotter... and I want to know if I can help." She finished. I raised an eyebrow.

"Unless you can produce a patronus I don't believe you'll be of much assistance with my warden, Bella," I muttered dryly. Suddenly she cackled, grinning at me madly.

"I knew it! You're planning to escape!" She sat up suddenly and straddled me, looking intently into my eyes. I fought the urge to flinch.

"Hardly. But I'm curious to see just how much hold a dementor can have over a mind..." Quite curious indeed... I thought, a dark smile spreading over my face as I reviewed what I had in store for my warden this evening.

Bella positively giggled at my expression. "Tell me how it ends, ickle Harry?" She asked – her voice was a throaty purr, or at least it would be if not for the sandpaper quality from our lack of nutrition. "You always tell the best stories!"

Rolling my eyes, I gave her an impassive expression. "I don't even know if it will work, Bella. I'll tell you about it later if I'm successful... if I fail, I might end up soulless." It was the truth; it was quite possible

my warden would simply kill me outright for daring to rebel against him. I tried not to dwell on the possibility.

She frowned and took a breath to object just as the screams began – the dementors were returning.

"Be careful, Harry..." she whispered as her warden entered my cell and roughly began to drag her back to her own. It didn't escape me that her voice was completely lucid.

Standing against the back of my cell, I watched impassively as a wraith slowly descended and dominated the entrance to my personal hell. I smiled then, making a sweeping gesture with my arms as if welcoming him.

I felt the first pricks on my occlumency shields, the only warning I would have before he rent them asunder. Hurriedly I fled back into my mind and dove into the currents of memory. My mindscape had been reduced to the state of a child – there was no structure to it at all. Golden strands of free-floating memory drifted on unseen tides as I swam deeper; I felt the dementor follow me into the depths of my conscious. That's it, keep up with me...

Reaching my destination, I turned and squared off with the wraith pursuing me. It raised a single, bony hand towards me as it approached, and I grinned like a Cheshire cat. "I hope you like what I've done with the place..." I whispered, feeling a slight hesitation in the creature before me.

Suddenly the entire plane of my mind shuddered. A formless void gave way to spiraling black stone that seemed to appear and sprout from everywhere and nowhere at once. Towering spires rose and challenged the sky above while gothic arches interwove them into a cohesive whole. I grinned savagely as a familiar room sprung up about us, a massive hall with adamantine doors and unyielding stone.

My mindscape was a vision of madness. It was Azkaban in all her terrible glory.

I charged at my warden then, my claws flashing in the low light. The creature dodged instinctively and I turned in midair, scraping my talons on the stone for purchase as I changed direction. It was upon

me before I could recover however, throwing me bodily through one of the reinforced doors and into a stream of memory.

A dark haired boy was sitting at the Hufflepuff table at Hogwarts, an expression of mirth on his face as a bright-haired young woman next to him glowered at something he'd said. The wraith pursuing me paused in shock over the happy memory; it proved to be a mistake. I jumped onto its back, my claws flashing as I tore into the dark flesh before me. The creature screeched and tried to throw me off, flying higher into the Great Hall of Hogwarts as we battled. I have to hold it in the memory, it's weakened by them...

It succeeded in dislodging me, causing me to fall and shatter one of the great tables. The memory fell away and we were back in my mindscape. My warden began to fly up into the great windows above and I roared, "You're not getting away from me!" as I ran forward and jumped onto a wall. Digging my claws into the stone, I scaled it before flipping back and latching onto the wraith in mid-air, bearing it down to the ground. I slammed its face into the nearest structure, an adamantine doorway, over and over with all the might of my will. Break... I want your fucking skull to break...

Eventually the door gave way instead, sending us tumbling into another memory. The aberration I fought succeeded in backhanding my face, staggering me back into a suit of armor. Nearby, a red-haired first year giggled as she accepted a misshapen white rose from a green-eyed boy. My first conjuration... The memory filled me with purpose and renewed my urge to claim victory.

The dementor was confused. I grinned savagely; I'd filled this entire hall with only happy memories – only things to bolster my will. Slamming into the beast again, my claws flashed as I reached for its face...

It screeched then, long and loud, shaking the entire foundation of my mindscape. A wall exploded and it tumbled outside. I tried to pursue it, launching myself into the air but my claws succeeded only in tearing the fabric of its cloak as it fled back to the waking world. No... I failed, no!

Reality swam back into focus and I beheld the vision of my nightmares. The dementor was atop me, holding me down to the ground with skeletal fingers. The black cloth covering its lipless

mouth was removed and I felt something detach deep within my chest. No...

I struggled, screaming as I kicked and punched at the beast above me. My strikes were ineffectual; it was growing harder to focus as more and more memories began to fall free. They siphoned my will and weakened me, even as I felt the pressure in my chest begin to move closer to the surface. It's my soul... I'm losing my soul...

A black despair settled over me, yet I refused to go down without one last-ditch effort. I pulled back the hood of my warden, staring into eyeless sockets of scorched bone and willed the connection to form...

I was falling through a sky amidst a storm.

My claws groped the air as I tried to find purchase in the raging winds, but there was none to find. I tried to will myself into flight, but this was not my mindscape. I have no power here...

A red sea was rapidly approaching me as I plummeted, and I struck it at speed. This isn't water... I realized as I tried to swim for the surface. Too thick... it's blood... The realization shocked me, but not nearly as much as the skeletal fingers that suddenly grasped my ankle and pulled me downwards.

I fought off the hands, kicking and inadvertently drawing in a mouthful of the foul liquid. I spluttered, beginning to panic as I found myself drowning. My claws stretched for the storm-tossed heavens above, but they seemed so far away now. I lost... I'll drown here and lose my soul... the thoughts came unbidden in my mind and I couldn't stifle them. Fear swam through me and my will faltered, unable to stem the tide of horror.

Please... don't let me die here... I've fought too hard to fail... my thoughts were coming faster, panic causing the synapses to fire at maddening rates. I called to deities far and wide, called to anything that I felt might have a remote chance of hearing my prayers for deliverance from this fate. Finally, I called to the flame, called to that which had abandoned me so many long months prior.

There's nothing left, nothing can save me... please... someone... Tonks' and Ginny's faces swam past me as my vision began to

darken, yet I didn't possess the will to hold onto the images and they fell away as quickly as they came. They can't save me now, only one thing can...

I recalled the fateful thirteen minutes on Privet Drive and the twilight flame that gave me the strength to change my destiny. It seemed a lifetime ago... You're the only thing that can save me... please... help me... My eyes darkened; I expelled the last breath within me as ghostly fingers bore me down into the soulless abyss beneath...

Something shifted inside of me...

The sky exploded into fire. The sea around me was snap-frozen and shattered immediately as the flame lunged downwards and swallowed me. I felt myself being carried upwards, back into the heavens above. Freedom...

I burst free from the sea and hovered high in the air. Black, raven wings spread from my shoulders and held me aloft as I gazed down at the crimson sea beneath. "Face me!" I roared. I was no longer afraid. The flame was with me now, swirling about me in a roiling conflagration. I felt it seethe with rage. My opponent was a tormentor; it was a cause for my suffering. The flame hated the warden with a passion that transcended all reason and thought.

A dark shape broke the surface of the sea and sped towards me, its cloak billowing in the howling wind as it screeched in rage. Your fury against mine, aberration...

I tucked my wings and charged while black fire wreathed my claws in hoarfrost. I slammed bodily into the wraith, snarling as I slashed with my talons and struck the warden across the face with the leading edges of my wings.

The creature screeched as my claws found purchase in its abdomen. It managed to shove me away and hastily flew back, retreating from my fury. I beat my wings twice for altitude before rushing at it once more. Nowhere for you to run now... I'll end it here!

We clashed like the titans of old above a sea of blood and beneath a burning sky.

Columns of the brackish fluid beneath rose towards me and ebon flame struck them down. Dark fire descended in torrents from the heavens above and entombed entire sheets of the sea in glacial cold.

The dementor and I battled through it all, my claws flashing in the dim light as I sought its throat. Skeletal fingers gripped my face and pushed me away while a lipless mouth shrieked in outrage at my open defiance.

I was undeterred. Sudden instinct invaded my mind and I followed the urge, grabbing the warden by its upper arms with my claws. I pulled my head back before burying my fangs into the creature's neck.

The shrieking intensified and I was forced to use all of my will to hold the writhing aberration steady. I wrenched my head from side to side before finally ripping out the warden's throat. Vile... I spit the quivering mass of flesh right back into the monster's face. The beast wailed, clutching at its ruined throat with both bony hands. Black blood sprayed in a torrent from the wound and fell down to join the pool below, but I was far from done.

Interlacing my claws, I buried them into the dementor's breast and pulled. Sternum and ribs gave way with a sickening crunch as I tore open its chest cavity, spilling free shriveled organs and more of the pestilent fluid. Something silver flashed within its ruined breast, but the bloodlust that gripped my mind refused to allow the sight to register completely.

Die... just fucking DIE! I roared into my mind, gripping the split ribs tighter and tearing...

Snarling in triumph, I spread my arms wide and offered up two halves of a broken warden to the ruined sky above.

Ebon flame bloomed and devoured the sea, the sky and all between.

A/N: One more chapter to go before the prologue is complete. I've already written part of it, so hopefully it should be along shortly.

Please read and review - I'm particularly interested in Bella's characterisation. She's an interesting character to write... but difficult to get right.

Prologue IV

Consciousness returned slowly. I felt warm for the first time in so many months; I felt whole for the first time in far longer.

I opened my eyes, blinking as my vision was greeted by a thick veil of darkness. It was always dim within Azkaban, but it was never pitch black such as this. The darkness had slight lines in it, almost like runes or signs of wear. It's a cloak... I realized; the sluggishness of my mind cleared instantly as a dawning horror gripped me. Dementor!

I screamed and flailed my limbs, trying to get the creature off of me. Kicking violently I managed to untangle myself, jumping to my feet and flattening against the wall of the cell to glare viciously at the beast on the floor. My heart thundered in my chest, and I felt the familiar stirrings of flame in my mind.

The panic began to recede as the numbing cold spread through my back. Clarity returned and made it easier to take stock of my situation. The dementor on the ground was unmoving – in fact, it seemed more formless than usual. Slowly I moved forward and prodded it with my foot, raising an eyebrow as it continued to lie still. It's a warden's cloak, but where's the warden?

Memories swam into focus, memories of battling a creature of myth above a crimson sea. Dark fire had delivered me, given me the strength to face the demon within its own twisted realm. I fell to my knees next to the cloak as realization struck me. I killed a dementor... the flame returned for me... As if answering my thoughts, a swell of ebon fire rose and swallowed all of my doubts and insecurities.

"I've missed you..." I whispered before slowly reaching over and touching the cloak with my hand. I can't believe we won...

I ran my hands over the dark material, not at all surprised that it was cold to the touch. Regardless, I pulled it to me and began to inspect it. The cloak was thick and made of some material I had never seen, sporting frayed edges at the hem and several apparent scorch marks. On a whim, I pulled it around my shoulders and shivered as I felt it wreath me in numbing cold. It feels like the fire, but more tangible...

It was not an unpleasant sensation, not at all. The cold of the cloak was different than the ever-present chill of Azkaban, and I decided I preferred it. Pulling the dark material closed around me, I noticed a flash of silver near where the cloak had been laying.

Odd... I thought, reaching over and touching it. My hand recoiled as if struck and I hissed. It's cold, so cold! There was frost on my fingers.

Memories continued to enter my mind of the battle between myself and my warden. I recalled a flash of silver just before I eviscerated the beast. Using the hem of the cloak I picked up the item on the ground and brought it closer. On inspection, it was actually a small silver chain – though it was of a craftsmanship I'd never seen before. Not really a chain... I thought, realizing the links fit together far too closely and seemed to be entwined around a single, almost-ethereal filament. More like some kind of bracelet or rosary... but it's broken, disconnected. I didn't notice any type of latch on either end, and the filament was frayed as if recently severed.

One thing was for certain – the item was a dark artifact. I could feel the cold malevolence pulsing from the chain in waves, and the twilight fire within me answered with its own rising tides of flame. To my surprise, I found my own heartbeat matching the tempo set by the two opposing forces of darkness. Fascinating...

Screams were still echoing from outside. It's still dementor feeding time, I suppose... I thought darkly, closing my eyes and leaning back against the stone wall behind me. I pulled the warden's cloak closer to my body and descended into my mindscape to assess the damage.

Azkaban... home sweet home. The mental projection of the fortress was remarkably undamaged save for the scene of my battle with the dementor, which was slowly repairing itself even without my conscious thought. I stepped out onto a battlement, letting a hand trail over one of the massive demonic gargoyles I had painstakingly recreated from memory.

That ocean isn't supposed to be there. I realized suddenly, looking out at the storm-tossed seas around my mental fortress. It was a dark crimson... Just like... I backpedaled in surprise, nearly tripping

and falling from the battlement. I recalled a battle high above a bloodied sea just such as this, a sea that had been consumed in fire... Where did it come from? I didn't make this!

A crack of thunder sounded from above and I looked up, frowning as I saw a maelstrom of black fire rather than clouds. All of this is a mental representation; all of it is symbolism. I recalled from my occlumency texts. This is the way my subconscious views myself and my reality, and it forms structures from my experiences and deeper emotions...

With a start I came to a sudden realization – the ebon flame was my magic. It made so much sense I nearly slapped myself. I'm such a fool, of course! The wards on Azkaban suppress magic, that's why it didn't come to me sooner...

My thoughts were running faster now, and the crimson sea began to churn along with them as my pulse raced. High stress environments can cause accidental magical discharges, but nearly having my soul ripped out is obviously taking it to the furthest extreme... did that help me overcome the wards? The fire had come for me in my darkest hour; it had given me the strength to destroy my tormentor when all hope had been lost.

I cast my eyes high into the burning sky above as a slow smile came to my face. "You've always been there for me, haven't you? I'm sorry it took me so long to see it..." I whispered, recalling the greatest horrors of my childhood and the mysterious power that had saved me. Apparition to escape Dudley, broken bones healing in days, my cupboard unlocking just when I was about to starve... My Hogwarts letter had been a revelation, giving name to my gifts and a promised explanation of my power. I had found the answers myself however. Blood is the price of power. I recalled from one of my dark arts texts, glancing out at the red sea once more. I've paid my share through the years.

I felt a numbing chill fall down in waves around me, dusting the citadel of my mind with frost and filling me with purpose. Gazing around at the spiraling tongues of dark fire dancing about me, I couldn't help but smile. You'd think it was almost sentient... Knowledge that the fire – my magic – would never leave me again filled my mind, causing my heart to swell and bolstering my will.

"Thank you," I murmured sincerely to the shifting flames, spreading my arms in a gesture of appreciation and acceptance.

My arms extended, the fire came to me and bore me back to the waking world.

My eyes opened and I gazed around my cell for a moment. "We need to get out of here," I murmured simply to dark pyre within me, standing and pulling my warden's cloak closer to my emaciated frame.

A glint of silver caught my eye and I looked down. The rosary... I reached down and picked it up with the hem of my cloak. A stray thought flitted through my mind and sparked a torrent of flame. It's almost ridiculous enough to work. I mused with a slight smirk. Time to test a theory...

Steeling myself, I grasped the tip of the silver chain and hissed as the cold immediately chilled my fingers to the bone. Tightening my occlumency barriers against the discomfort, I held the chain aloft and gazed at it for a moment. It seems to have some affinity to my magic...

Focusing, I gathered the flame and pushed it into the chain with bated breath. The chain began to glow brighter, filling the cell with silvery light. It's working! I thought excitedly, though I rapidly became concerned as the glow continued to increase in brilliance. I... can't stop it. I realized; it seemed to be pulling my magic into it. Frost began to cover my hand and the first stirrings of panic settled about my mind.

This has to stop! With effort I managed to open my hand and let the artifact fall to the floor, sighing in relief as the drain on my magic ended immediately once the contact was severed. The chain continued to glow however, and I took an involuntary step back. It flared brightly for a moment and I felt my magic hurriedly wreath my mind and body in a protective shell of fire. What's... oh shi—!

A sudden wave of concussive force exploded outward from the chain and flung me into the stone wall behind me. Dazed, I fell to a heap on the ground and groaned in pain. Fuck me... that hurt. I thought darkly, pushing myself up and glaring balefully at the chain sitting innocently in the center of the cell.

"Well it certainly works as a conduit," I groused, snatching up the chain again and glaring at it as it sat in my palm. A frosty mist rose in the low light, and my eyes bulged as I felt the drain on my magic begin anew. I hurriedly stuffed it into a seam on the cowl of my cloak and that seemed to insulate me from it. So much for that idea...

I slumped against the back wall in defeat, resting my head back against the cool stone. At least I know it can channel magic, though it's useless without some medium to focus it... I considered what might happen if I tried to actually cast something through the chain as it was and shivered at the prospect.

Probably end up legless like Dudders... the thought brought a cruel smile to my face. Closing my eyes, I decided to sleep.

Sometime later I was awakened by a persistent rubbing sensation across my chest.

Opening my eyes in annoyance and a bit of anxiety, I beheld a pair of violet eyes... less than an inch from my own. I couldn't help it – I jumped. "Damnit Bella!" I hissed, glaring at her.

She didn't even flinch at my venom, instead running her hands over me beneath my cloak. "Ickle Harry... I heard you screaming earlier," she murmured. Her voice was soft, which usually meant she was near-lucidity. She was seated directly atop me, straddling my legs and pinning me beneath her against the wall.

I rolled my eyes. "I scream all the time. So do you. It's a side-effect of having your mind raped," my sarcasm didn't seem to affect her either, as her hands continued to slowly run over my chest before sliding into my shoulder-length hair. This is actually kind of nice, but I'm not telling her that...

She shook her head after a moment. "No... your voice was different... angry..." she whispered, leaning in closer until our noses nearly touched. "Where did this cloak come from, ickle Harry?" She's been lucid for too long... Warning bells sounded in my mind, and I tensed.

"It came from my warden after I killed it," I replied, discreetly crossing my fingers beneath the dark cloak. I wasn't above resorting

to muggle superstitions when Bella was involved. "It's a dark artifact, and I have a theory that the wardens will leave me alone as long as I wear it. I would assume its magical signature would be tied to the wards here—"

"Ickle Harry... killed a dementor?" She interrupted though her voice was so quiet I could hardly hear it despite our proximity.

"Yes... I'm not sure of the specifics. The memory is hazy... but my magic intervened just as it was about to steal my soul," I murmured, making the mistake of focusing too much on the memory and not enough on filtering my words. I felt her entire body tense the moment I finished speaking. This won't be pretty... I quickly tried to recover, "But I came out of it just fine! Not to mention I can kill wardens now, I'm sure I could do it again—"

"Ickle Harry...?" her voice was soft as she leaned forward and brushed my hair back from my left ear. What is she doing...? I wondered as she leaned forward and her breath washed over my earlobe. I shivered.

"Bella...?" my voice was hesitant, though I had to stifle a gasp as she gently nibbled my ear and blew warm breath over the lobe once more.

It goes without saying that I was absolutely terrified.

"Mmm... Ickle Harry..." she whispered, and I felt her tense suddenly. Oh fuck me— "You arrogant ickle murdering plotter fool!" she screeched into my ear then bit the lobe harshly, causing me to cry out.

"Ow! Damnit Bella, stop it!" I hissed, trying to push her off and only succeeding in receiving more pain as she wrenched her head to the side. Warmth flowed down my neck as she finally pulled back, and I saw blood coating her bared teeth.

"Do you think? Do you even consider? What if you had died!" She was still shrieking, roughly grabbing my hair and making me look into her mad eyes.

"Then I'd be out of Azkaban," I replied darkly, glaring up at her. To my surprise, her eyes shifted once more and she seemed to deflate atop me.

"And you'd leave Bella..." she whispered, and to my dawning horror I saw tears prick her eyes, "You'd leave me..."

How do I get myself into these situations! "That's not what I meant Bella!" I protested. Honestly, the wardens of Azkaban were probably better at comforting people than I was on my best day. "Besides, it worked out for the best," I offered, "I ended up with a pair of dark artifacts for my trouble!" I produced the chain, held in the hem of my cloak.

She stared at it for a long moment, her eyes flashing between the malevolent rosary and my face. "Mmm. I suppose I should get used to you leaving now..." she seemed to brighten as she spoke. I was thoroughly confused – not a new emotion when this woman was involved. "My ickle Harry, spreading his wings and flying away..." The sudden image of raven wings spread over a bloodied sea flashed in my mind and I brushed it aside.

"Erm... yes. It's high time we left this place, no?" I offered with my best smile. The muscles strained from the alien gesture. "We'll wait until the next time the wardens leave, then—" I trailed off as she began to shake her head.

"Mmm... no," She murmured, and I blinked. At my curious gaze, she elaborated. "No, ickle Harry. I'm waiting for my master... He will deliver me from this place and together we will—"

"Now who's being the fool?" I hissed, glaring at her. "You'd stay here and rot while waiting in some vain hope that your lord not only cheated death but cares enough about the lot of you to rescue you from this hell?" I was livid, never once had I considered she wouldn't be escaping with me.

She blinked at me once – I'd never snapped at her with such venom. Her expression darkened as she processed my words however and I hissed as her hands gripped my throat. "Do not... do not... question my master," she whispered, and her eyes promised murder. I glared into the violet depths.

"I will question whoever I damn well please when you're involved," my words were a low growl. To be honest, I'm not sure when our shared comfort turned to some form of affection. I couldn't help but feel this way however – she was the only one within this place that seemed human to me and not some shell of flesh lost in sorrows.

An amused look flitted across her face. "And what of the wardens? How does ickle Harry plan to break the big bad Azkaban and set his Bella free?"

"I'm not afraid of the wardens! I'll destroy them all just like this one!" I gripped my cloak and pulled up the tattered cowl for her to see. "Then I'll level this prison and we'll freeze the fucking ocean and walk out of here!" I hissed. I truly hated being questioned, especially when I was still working out the details...

She stared at me for a long moment and leaned back. At first I thought she was going to stand, but then a resounding crack echoed through the cell as she slapped me. She just... how dare she!

"You are a fool, Harry," she whispered, her voice deathly quiet and without a trace of madness. "An arrogant fool! You are not all powerful. No one is... not even my master..." she trailed off and all the fury left her voice. I blinked in surprise. She's never said one word against Voldemort before...

"You'll die if you challenge the wardens. You'll die if you challenge my master, too... you'll die just like Sirius..." she trailed off and leaned forward, pressing her head against my chest. I took a breath to object before her last words struck me. I know that name...

"Sirius Black?" I queried softly; the name was unique enough that her reference warranted investigation.

She nodded slowly, her hair tickling my chin. "He was my cousin. Rodolphus killed him." She whispered quietly and I nodded, reaching up to stroke her hair slowly.

"You were a Black, then?" I asked, trying to steer her away from the memories. Silently I cursed the wardens; they'd likely been the ones to bring this on with their daily sessions.

She nodded again. "Mmm. Silly cousin Sirius... always thinking he could save everyone..." her voice was distant. "But he couldn't save Bella, oh no... couldn't save his Longbottoms either... couldn't save himself..."

"I was told he died during the attack that night..." I offered, trying to gently lead her along. Her lucidity was faltering and I felt this information was important. She must have been there...

"Sirius was a fool. He tried to help me..." she suddenly began shrieking, "Come back with me, Bella! We'll get you a trial, Bella! I know Rodolphus drugged you, Bella!" she slumped against me, her fury spent as quickly as it had come. Her voice was barely more than a whisper as she continued, "He tried to help me and died, ickle Harry... just like you will."

"Drugged you?" I asked quietly, sliding off my cloak and draping it over both of us. She hissed at the cold of the fabric for a moment, then calmed.

"My husband wanted the Black family fortunes. He convinced my master that Regulus was a traitor..." she trailed off. You didn't answer my question, Bella... Her eyes locked onto mine suddenly and she gripped my shoulders. "Regulus would never betray us! He was loyal, he took the mark! He was my blood!" she hissed, and I nodded quickly in agreement.

"I'm sure he wouldn't Bella... so, Regulus was killed for his supposed treachery?" I felt it was a reasonable assumption by what I knew of Voldemort.

"Yes. After that, Sirius was the last obstacle... as long as I produced an heir. Cissy was younger..." she murmured, leaning up and stroking my hair slowly. Her eyes were locked onto mine, but they seemed distant. I wonder what she sees when she looks into the past.

I considered delving into her thoughts, but even I was leery about exposing my ordered conscious to the chaos of her mind. "So when Sirius arrived at the Longbottoms, your husband killed him?" I asked. If Sirius was the last male heir of the Black line, then lordship would pass to the eldest son of the eldest daughter, which is apparently Bella... and until the child was of age, stewardship of the family and

estate would pass to her husband – Rodolphus. Living with the Slytherins at Hogwarts had necessitated a bit of study in pureblood customs.

She nodded slowly. "I tried to convince him to join us... but Sirius wouldn't listen. He was such a fool..." Her eyes slid from mine before she snatched them back to meet my gaze, gripping me tightly. "Promise Bella you won't be a fool, Harry!" Damn her direction changes! I knew better than to press her, however. Especially since I've never heard of the Lestranges having a child...

I pushed the thoughts aside and reviewed her words before frowning at her. "I'm not joining the Dark Lord, Bella," I muttered. Unless it's to get close enough to rip out his heart.

She matched my expression but shook her head. "It doesn't matter! When we break this world and the sky falls, I want ickle Harry to find a hole and hide while we fix it!"

"I'm not going to hide, Bella! My parents tried that and died for it!" I all but snarled. She gripped my hair again and leaned in close.

"And you will join them," she whispered, enunciating each word clearly while her eyes never strayed from mine. I shivered.

"Just... just let it go for now, Bella..." I finally whispered, sighing as she sat up and pulled my head to her chest. "We need to escape Azkaban first, anyway..." I added, leaning into her slightly.

I felt her shake with a stifled laugh. "Not we, ickle Harry..." then she tensed and placed a hand under my chin, lifting my gaze to hers. "When you get out... among the normal people... remember this," she whispered before lightly brushing her lips to mine. I blinked in surprise.

"You're better than them, ickle Harry... we are better than them. We are more than them... they fear us – they lock us in their cages!" Her arms flew into the air in a grandiose gesture to the ageless stone around us. "But we will have our day, we will shatter their precious little fantasy world into a thousand ickle pieces!" she was on the cusp of shrieking before her volume fell and she looked deeply into my eyes. "Ickle... no, Harry... we are gods and they are but

insects... remember this. Don't let them tell you different, don't let them control you. Kill them, for they deserve no less!"

My eyes widened as she spoke. Us? What does she... A cold wind blew up my spine and I suddenly understood. Us. Dark Wizards. Those who this world has forsaken, those who are feared by ones who know nothing of suffering or loss or hate...

I slowly nodded and whispered, "I won't be controlled, Bella..." Not anymore.

She stared into my eyes for a long moment, searching. Finally she seemed to find what she sought, and she nodded. "Good."

Bella's warden had come for her nearly an hour ago. I'd been pacing ever since, my eyes glancing at the open bars to my cell every few moments. Finally I walked determinedly towards the exit to my personal slice of Azkaban and stopped. Bella's words were still echoing in my head. I'm not arrogant – I killed one once and I can do it again! I sighed; it was impossible to fake confidence with the voice of your own mind, I was realizing.

I stood near the cell bars for a long moment considering options. There has to be a way out of here, but do I dare face the wardens? I looked outside my cell into the half-darkness of the hallway beyond. Fingering my cloak, I took a determined step forward. I need to test my theory.

Barely a dozen steps from my cell a warden descended from above and hovered directly in front of me. Dread settled within my breast but I refused to show any outward signs of fear. "Hello," I offered. A skeletal hand reached forward and rested over my shoulder – I flinched. What is he doing...? My memories rattled within my mind, but I felt no overt signs of intrusion. "I can kill you too, you know," I threatened with a confidence that I truly did not feel.

The hand slid down my shoulder, passing over the fabric of my cloak. "Was he a friend of yours?" I asked sarcastically, cocking my head. The warden simply floated back and drifted away. Odd...

Sensing eyes on me, I leaned my head back and looked to the high gothic ceilings; I very nearly fainted. Over two dozen wardens circled high above me, each of their hoods swiveled to observe me. That...

is beyond disturbing. My heart thundered in my chest; it was so loud I could hear it over the ever-present screaming of tortured prisoners.

My feet scraped on the stone as I slowly backpedaled. More wardens began to gather from outside the prison, flying in from the windows and joining the swarm of wraiths above me. Why aren't they doing anything? I was not a coward, but my anxiety was nearly driving me to hysterics. I could feel the borders of my mind being tested, but they made no attempt to breach my barriers.

Clamping my will down savagely onto my mind and mastering the panic, I pulled my cloak tighter around me and walked determinedly across the hall. I refuse to be afraid of them anymore. My hands gripped the dark fabric around me in a white-knuckle hold.

As I walked across the hall, the wardens began to slowly disperse. I expelled a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. I suppose they got bored... or does this mean my theory is correct? My pride demanded the latter, but I had a sinking feeling it was simply the former.

In short order I was standing before one of the massive adamantine doorways on either side of the hall. Reaching out to run a hand over the metal, I hissed as protective wards flashed wherever my hand touched and illuminated hundreds of ancient runes carved into the metal. How did the warden open it? I wracked my brain for the memory; it had been nearly a year ago now.

He just... floated in front of it for a moment and it opened. That's all I could remember him doing; it was absolutely infuriating. "Damn it, open!" I hissed finally in exasperation, kicking the door with my bare foot and immediately regretting it. "Fucking..." Sighing in annoyance, I leaned forward and rested my forehead against the cool metal. The collar of my cloak fell open, and I heard the clink of metal on metal.

Raising an eyebrow I glanced down. The rosary... Part of the silver chain had slid free from the seam in the cloak's cowl and was resting against the doorway just beneath my chin. Several of the runes nearby flickered. Is it really that simple...? Emboldened, I pulled out the chain and hissed as it touched my skin. There was an immediate pull on my magic; a pull I once again was unable to stop.

"Damnit, not again!" I panicked and tried to drop the artifact, but it seemed fused to my skin. The cold was slowly traveling up my arm in numbing waves. Suddenly the runes on the doorway before me flared to brilliance as a quartet of massive metal locks shifted. The door creaked open on ancient hinges while the chain fell from my numb fingers moments later.

I glared down at it balefully before carefully retrieving it with the hem of the cloak and tucking it back into the seam. Simple enough I suppose... The doorway beckoned, and I walked through it with purpose.

The prison was just as mazelike as I remembered. I wandered through dreary corridors for some time before finding myself standing in an exposed outer hallway. I walked to the stone barrier and leaned over, looking down at jagged rocks and crashing waves. "There's no way to leave..." the realization was as sudden as it was crushing.

I can't make portkeys. I only know the principles of apparition, and even then I don't know how far it is to shore. It also didn't escape me that the island was likely warded against both forms of transportation. I could conjure a boat, perhaps... I recalled the small boat I'd arrived in, though it had been wreathed in protective wards to survive the journey. "Conjured items don't take enchantment well..." I whispered to myself before sighing explosively. Defeated, I leaned back against a nearby stone pillar.

I'll have to wait on another prisoner to come. The boats must transport back to the mainland at some point to gather more prisoners. I reasoned, immediately feeling better now that I had some semblance of a plan. Until then, I planned to improve mine and Bella's lot in this hell.

"That's fourteen, now," I murmured happily as I walked past a warden to exit the cell. Glancing back at the screaming woman on the floor I sighed. Better you than me.

After learning how to open the large doors I'd gone through three other wings of the prison and nicked nutrient potions from the other prisoners. The wardens never bothered me when I entered the cells, though I paid careful attention not to stand between their hooded

gaze and their victims. I'd been scavenging for nearly two hours now and I had quite the haul.

Most prisoners it seemed drank their potions immediately as I did, but some of them simply ignored the sustenance and the vials had collected in their cells by the day. I suppose death by starvation is a kinder fate for the weak-willed. I thought, hearing the jingle of potion vials in my pocket. I'll put these to better use.

The screaming began to die down as I was leaving one wing of the prison, causing me to turn and look back into the hallway. Wardens were slowly pulling out of the cells and ascending to the high ceilings, and I blinked in surprise. Has it truly been that long? I should get back. I fingered my swollen left ear for a moment. Definitely don't want to keep dear Bella waiting...

As I dashed back through the hallways to my cell I had a sinking suspicion that I was forgetting something. Probably just nerves. I concluded just as I stepped through one of the massive, unlocked gates.

I returned to my cell and winced as I spotted a tall woman in the back, leaning against the wall and staring listlessly ahead. "Hello Bella!" I greeted cheerfully, stifling a wince as her eyes swam into focus onto me. She cocked her head. You've got some explaining to do, Harry... I muttered in my head – I knew that look, after all.

"I, erm, brought presents!" Recovering quickly I began to pull vials from the few pockets of my robes that remained viable. "Drink up, I can probably get us more tomorrow," I murmured, setting the vials in the corner of my cell and offering her one.

She stared at me for a long moment before her eyes slid down my arm to the vial. "Tsk... ickle Harry bringing home meals..." her eyes slid up to mine again before they flashed. Damn it! "Shall I set the table like a good wife!" she shrieked. I wonder what memory brought this on...

"What's wrong, Bella?" I asked hesitantly. That's such a loaded question.

Her eyes stayed locked onto mine for a long moment before she snatched the potion and swallowed it. After tossing the vial

carelessly, she grabbed my robes roughly and pushed me to sit down against the wall before plopping down atop me. I grunted from the sudden impact but knew better than to argue.

"Explain," she finally stated after staring me down for nearly a full minute straight. I finally let out the breath I'd been holding.

"The doors open to the silver artifact, and the wardens left me alone," I started, wincing as her eyes narrowed. "So I explored the prison. Did you know there are several more wings beside this one? I wonder just how big this place—"

"Did you see...?" she interrupted quickly, glancing over her shoulder. I blinked and fought the urge to slap my forehead. Of course, her husband is in one of the other wings.

"I don't think so. I might have, but I wouldn't recognize his face," I offered. She stared at me for a long moment before slowly nodding.

Sliding over next to me, she leaned against my shoulder and closed her eyes. Crisis averted. I thought with a trace of happiness, pulling out one of my recently-stolen vials of nutrient potion and pouring it down my throat. What I wouldn't give for some pumpkin juice right about now...

"I had a child once," a soft voice whispered some time later. I jumped slightly, having thought she'd fallen asleep some time ago.

"You did?" I asked, watching as her hand rubbed over her stomach for a moment. For some reason, a sense of foreboding fell about me.

"Mmm. For a few months," Bella murmured, pressing her face deeper into my hair. "He'd be nearly ickle Harry's age."

For a few months...? "Bella, what happened?" I asked softly. I knew better than to pry, but this wasn't something I could simply let drop.

"Rodolphus needed an heir..." she hissed, then shook her head. "No, Rodolphus needed a meal ticket to the Black fortunes..." she corrected, nodding to herself. "After he got himself an ickle Black wife..." she trailed off before suddenly gripping me tightly. "He gave me the nicest candies! They shined like pearls!"

Pearls...? I had learned things from my extended proximity to Bella. One of them was that she never said anything irrelevant, even if it was under the guise of madness. The trick was being able to decipher her psychosis and find the meaning beneath. "What kind of pearls, Bella?" A sinking feeling settled into my stomach.

"Like ickle mummy pearls..." she giggled, nuzzling me.

Mother of pearl. My mind worked on overdrive, sifting through my memories with a speed I'd have never achieved before Azkaban. Sirius thought her husband drugged her... what has a mother of pearl... my thoughts stopped suddenly and I turned my head to her, eyes wide in shock. "He drugged you with Amortentia!"

She cackled loudly and nodded with an almost violent motion. "Ickle Harry is so smart! Mmm, my husband thought he was so clever... thought he'd put one over on Bella, thought he'd deceive a Black!" she shrieked, her eyes suddenly locking onto mine. "He was a fool. One day he forgot to give Bella her candies..."

"You recovered?" I asked softly.

"Mmm. Not for long, just long enough..." her eyes glanced down at her belly for a single moment, but I caught it. My heart nearly stopped.

"What... what did you do, Bella...?" I asked slowly, morbid curiosity forcing me to speak.

"Silly Rodolphus..." she whispered, clutching at my cloak and apparently heedless to the cold of the fabric. "So many plans, so much ambition... and yet..." she lifted her gaze and smiled at me; tears shined in her eyes, but her smile was wide and open. "He kept Bella's wand, but he left the potion cabinet unlocked."

Gods... "Bella... what potions did you take?" Horror settled deep in my soul.

She smiled at me then as a tear finally broke from her eyelids and tracked through the dirt and grime on her face. It looked far too pure, far too alien in such a place as this. "Everything..."

My heart actually did stop. "Bella..." I could scarcely do more than whisper.

"Sleepy time, ickle Harry..." she interrupted, leaning against me as she pressed her face back into my shoulder. "Sweet dreams..." She fell asleep nearly instantly.

It took me over an hour.

I awoke to shrieking.

An emaciated man had Bella's long hair in his hand and roughly wrenched her to her feet, backhanding her across the face and sending her spiraling into one of the stone walls. Her head struck the wall at speed, and she collapsed to the ground unmoving. I left the gates open...

"Stupid whore! Why the Dark Lord favored you I'll never—" he started.

I cut him off by barreling into his midsection with a tackle, managing to force him against a wall. He snarled at me and slammed his fists into my back, sending me to my knees. Grunting from the impact, I forced myself back up only to catch a fist directly to my face that staggered me back across the cell.

He was upon me in moments, backhanding me savagely and sending me sprawling to the ground. "Who the fuck are you, boy? Bella's new toy?" he snarled, straddling my chest and wrapping his hands around my throat. My eyes bulged as he began to squeeze. Can't... breathe...

Magic flared inside of me in a torrent of fire, and I tried to catch his eyes to vent the enraged flames. It was not to be, as his gaze alternated between my throat and Bella's prone form. "The bitch ruined everything... everything..." he was whispering, but I was hardly paying attention. My hands clawed at the ones around my throat, but it was to no avail. He's bigger... stronger... "The master isn't here to save her this time..." he continued, a manic grin spreading over his face.

I'm going to die like a muggle. The thought was incredibly distressing. I pulled at the hands harder, my vision starting to blur as

I sputtered for breath. His thumbs pushed into my windpipe and my eyes bulged wider. Panic gripped me as my heart thundered in my chest and wasted what precious little breath I had. I won't... I won't die like a dog!

There was only one option. At least Bella might survive it... I groped at the collar of my cloak, succeeding in freeing the silver artifact. The man's gaze was still on Bella as I fumbled with the rosary, but his eyes snapped back to my face when I jabbed the frayed tip into his side. Smirking savagely, I gathered the last breath in my body and hissed the incantation, "Cru...cio..."

My world exploded into pain. Strands of unfocused burgundy power lashed from the artifact and clenched around our bodies in a vice of torment. Screams assaulted my ears, screams from two separate voices. I could hardly form thoughts as my traitorous nerves laid siege to my mind. The crimson sea of my mindscape was churning, slamming tidal waves into my mental fortress as my body rebelled from the pain.

Can't stop it... can't... the artifact had a hold on my magic now; it was impossible to cut the spell. Distantly, I felt frost cover my hand and forearm. The man atop me was twitching violently, fingers of deep crimson power wrapping around his body along with mine. The pain came in tremendous waves, searing every nerve of my being. Each pulse of torment was punctuated by a crimson wave striking my mind's barriers; they were eroding quickly... What happens when they're breached...?

I was spared finding the answer by a feminine shriek. The pain stopped immediately afterwards and I collapsed back onto the cool stone. The artifact slid across the floor, wisps of burgundy still extending from the chain. She... knocked it away... It was so hard to think.

Bella spared the malevolent artifact a single glance before descending on the man atop me, shoving him off and straddling him. "Hello husband..." she hissed, looking down at his twitching form. The torture curse had left us both nearly immobile.

"You forgot to bring candies..." she started then trailed off as she stared at his face. "Oh wait, you did bring me some! How thoughtful..."

I watched in morbid fascination as she used her nails to roughly remove his left eye from its socket.

"I do so love my candies, Rodolphus..." she whispered as she stared at the eyeball in her hand. The man was twitching violently, blubbering something that I couldn't hear. My ears were ringing; it was hard enough to make out Bella's words.

Her hand flexed once and the eyeball burst, causing the body beneath her to shudder violently while a clear fluid ran between her fingers. "Oops..." she giggled before glancing at my prone form. Our eyes met for a single moment, and I saw her violet orbs flash magenta. I tried to sputter something to tell her I was alright, but it came out as a strangled wheeze. Her eyes widened at the sound.

It was at this point that she completely lost it.

Shrieking like a banshee, she tore into the body beneath her. Her nails broke the flesh of his face, tearing off strips of skin and ruining his other eye in moments. She wasn't done however, as she clawed her way down to his throat. "Eat the candies, Bella!" she screeched, ripping into the tender flesh as he thrashed beneath her. He screamed almost as loud as he had under the Cruciatus.

Eventually she must have severed an artery, as a fount of blood sprayed and coated her upper body along with one of the walls of the cell. Some splattered over my face as well, but still I could hardly move. At least it's warm...

It's so hard to breathe... my throat was constricted, and I could feel my consciousness slipping away.

My last sight was the body of Rodolphus Lestrange going still.

A scraping noise drew me from unconsciousness some time later.

Slowly I turned my head and watched a warden drag the body of Bella's husband from the cell. I could see bits of bone standing out like islands in the ruined flesh of his throat. Bella...

I looked up at her – my head was resting in her lap. She was rocking back and forth slowly, staring into space while her hand absently

stroked my hair. She was drenched in blood. "B-Bella...?" I croaked softly, it was the best I could do. Still hard to breathe...

Her hand slid up and lightly brushed across her stomach before returning to my hair. "Arcturus..." she whispered, looking down at me after a few moments. She stared into my eyes for several long minutes. Who is—?

"Ickle Harry kept his word..." she whispered softly while I watched her gaze slide over to the bloodstains on the walls and floor.

Huh? "W-what...?"

Bella looked down at me, the violet of her eyes standing out brightly against the red stains on her face. "Ickle Harry set his Bella free..."

She never left my cell after that day.

It took me some time to recover from my near-strangulation and the Cruciatus exposure, and Bella stayed with me through it all. Her warden had come for her and she had shrieked and fought the creature with all she had, until it had finally simply given in and tortured her in my cell. That was days ago though, and I had been thankful that I had procured so many additional vials of nutrient potion. After my warden had been killed, the vials had stopped appearing in my cell each day and I was in no condition to scavenge for more.

Bella had taken care of me during my recovery. She would suffer her torture, then drag herself to the vials and pour one down her throat and another down mine. Afterwards she would sit next to me, hardly ever speaking, and glance between the artifact near the bars and back at me. One day she had finally walked over to retrieve it and screamed when she touched it.

"Ickle Harry's bracelet attacked Bella..." she had muttered, slumping next to me once more and glaring balefully at the artifact. Her fingers were still frostbitten. I crawled to it the next day and stuffed it into the cowl of my cloak to prevent her from having to try again.

Getting back to the present, however...

I watched from my slumped position against the wall as she thrashed in the other corner, one hand on her stomach and the other clawing for the air. "Arcturus... mummy Bella is sorry..." she whispered, over and over. Whatever she sees when she looks into the past... I don't want to know anymore.

Her warden hovered in the entrance of the cell; its hooded gaze was locked on Bella's writhing form. As I watched however, it spun around and looked at something in the hallway before shrieking and flying up into the high rafters above. Odd... I thought, watching a pale white light begin to illuminate the area outside the cell. Voices drifted to me from the hallway...

"Which one is his cell? This is horrible..."

"Focus, Rebecca. Keep checking."

"Remember what Mad-Eye said; when we find him don't look in his eyes."

"He's just a kid. I doubt he'll be in any position to do a damn thing after a year in this hellhole."

Aurors. I glanced at Bella and saw her just beginning to recover. Sliding over to join her, I pulled her to me and hissed into her ear, "Aurors are outside, Bella."

She looked at me with a lost expression for a moment before she blinked and seemed to process my words. Immediately she sprung up and sat on her knees next to me, her eyes locked on the cell bars and a hard look on her face.

Presently a blinding light appeared in the entrance to the cell, and I hissed as a patronus trotted past. Those things really are too damned bright... "Erm... I think this is him, Kingsley!" a woman's voice called. Squinting against the glare, I made out at least four Aurors grouping at the entrance to my cell.

"Is that him? And who's that with him?" the Auror on the left asked. I could feel Bella's disdain as she sat next to me.

"Awww... the ickle Aurors came to play, Harry. If only Bella had a wand..." she trailed off and giggled suddenly. "Frank and Alice taught Bella the best way to play with Aurors..."

The center Auror who I assumed was their leader, a rather tall black man, turned a glare onto her. "Bellatrix Lestrange, I presume. Frank and Alice Longbottom were friends. Step away from Mr. Potter," he commanded quietly. No such luck there, friend. I thought sarcastically, glancing between the four of them. I was unable to resist a smirk as I found none of them would meet my eyes. Except...

"Why don't we just stun them both and levitate him out of here?" the one on the right asked, and his eyes locked onto mine...

Master Legilimens can enter a person's thoughts without their conscious knowledge and leave no traces that they had been there at all. It goes without saying that I was not a master Legilimens. I dove into the man's thoughts with the force of a battering ram, crashing through the barriers of his mind and expelling a wave of ebon fire into his conscious. The blaze scoured his mind for what I sought before returning it to me for my perusal. He's here? Now this is interesting...

The intrusion had lasted perhaps three seconds in the real world. The man fell to his knees as I withdrew, shivering uncontrollably and clutching his head. Two of the Aurors raised their wands at me instinctively. Bella shrieked and dove at them, her nails glinting in the light from the patroni outside. The Aurors' wands immediately shifted to her.

"Stupefy!" the female Auror incanted even as their leader yelled at her to hold her fire. Bella! On instinct I gripped the artifact hidden in my cloak while my other hand reached out and grabbed the hem of Bella's tattered robes to stop her. I felt a gout of black fire rush from my chest and into the rosary.

The stunner slammed into a shield inches from Bella's chest, expelling a shower of sparks to join the few traces of dark energy that had stopped it.

No one moved. Even Bella was confused, glancing back at me before glaring at the Aurors in front of her once more.

"That's enough. Dumbledore is waiting," I muttered dryly, pushing myself to my feet and discretely tucking the artifact back into my cloak. Where did that urge come from...? How did I know it would even work...? I felt drained.

"Yes, he is," the dark-skinned man murmured, giving me an appraising look. One Auror was helping the other off the floor – I couldn't resist a smirk when I noticed he was still shivering.

"What the hell was that, Kingsley? It looked like some kind of shield, but it didn't put off any light at all..." the female Auror murmured quietly to the tall one. My eyes widened at her words, but any thoughts on the matter were interrupted as Bella suddenly gripped me by the shoulders.

"Ickle Harry..." she whispered, glancing at the Aurors and back at me. "Old pigeon-lovers wouldn't come to big cages unless they thought an ickle one from their flock was there..." she continued. What is she...? I suddenly remembered her words from some time ago and my eyes widened. "Remember what Bella said..." she whispered intently, staring into my eyes.

I nodded slowly. "I won't let them control me, Bella," I quietly promised to her.

She nodded back at me before pulling me into a tight embrace. I hugged her back just as tightly, ignoring the clearing throats of the intruders. "If he doesn't come for you, I will," I quietly promised before releasing her slowly and walking towards the Aurors.

Bella grinned madly at me and nodded. "I'll hold ickle Harry to that..." she trailed off while I walked away from the cell, following the Aurors. We made it halfway through the hallway before gales of insane laughter came from behind, "Ickle Harry, spreading his wings and flying away!"

I couldn't help it – I cackled madly along with her. The Aurors didn't find the situation nearly as amusing.

"I want the kid brought up on charges..." one of the Aurors near me groused as we walked through the mazelike corridors of Azkaban. "What the fuck did you do to me anyway? How long is this going to

last?" he turned to me and glared – at my nose. He was still shivering, after all.

I snorted and muttered, "It'll wear off eventually." Probably.

"Listen you—"

"Leave him alone, Jeffrey. He's been through enough," the female Auror murmured and I barely hid my grin at the expression on the man's face.

"Cut the chatter," the dark-skinned Auror – Kingsley – barked from in front.

"Sorry, sir," the female Auror – who I had learned was Rebecca – replied. I glanced over at her. She was walking closer to me than the others and appeared to be visibly unnerved by her surroundings. Looking down, I saw her wand resting in her left hand near me. I could grab it... But even if I had a wand and assuming it had enough affinity to function for me, I'd still have to deal with four Aurors.

An Ice Tomb spell at point blank into the lead one's back would kill him and likely incapacitate the other two beside me. I thought, my eyes discreetly glancing around and judging distances. The cloak would probably shield me from the worst of it, but the question is if I can recover fast enough to deal with the one in the back...

They had to have portkeys to leave this place, after all. However, I realized my chances of escape were slim even if I struck down all four of them. The old man was here somewhere... And he probably has the portkey, anyway.

Sighing, I decided to bide my time. Rebecca heard my sigh and reached over to pat my shoulder, apparently believing my surroundings were affecting me as much as her. I fought the urge to hiss at the contact, though thankfully the chill of my cloak warded her off. "D-don't worry, we'll have you out of here soon..." she whispered.

"Rebecca!" Kingsley snapped and she flinched. Have me out of here...? Don't they remember I killed two of their number just a year ago? Oh, and the three muggles. I refused to consider them family.

"What? He shouldn't even be here! You heard what Dumbledore—"

"The hell he shouldn't be here! Did you see what he did to me!"

"I said cut the chatter!" the lead Auror stated, turning and fixing both of them with a glare. I wonder what she was going on about... Yes, this was very interesting.

"Are you sure this is the right way, Kingsley? This place is damn maze," shivering-Auror grumbled from my other side. Kingsley's back tensed for a moment after the query. So you're not sure, wonderful.

"Take the next left," I offered helpfully, drawing curious gazes from all of them. I honestly didn't have a clue where we were or where we were going, but they didn't know that of course.

To my surprise, the next left did indeed bring us to a door with two brightly-lit torches outside of it. All of the Aurors turned and gave me surprised looks. I gave them my best grin and sauntered through the doorway when Kingsley opened it. My luck is the stuff of legends, you lot had best learn that now.

I froze merely three steps into the room. Dumbledore sat at the other side of a stone table, looking like he belonged there. The room had a slight, dull sheen to it. Recent cleaning charms, lots of them.

Fighting down the sudden anger at the sight of the man and the rush of cold fire up my spine, I sat down in the chair in front of him. He looked at me with his damnable twinkling eyes. What I'd give to see Bella claw those out too... the thought brought a smile to my face. Dumbledore thought it was for him, and he smiled back – I nearly retched.

"Hello Harry," he murmured jovially, sliding a small glass dish across the stone. "Lemon drop?"

I boggled at him for a moment before looking down at the candies. Probably didn't come all this damn way to poison me. Feeling that my reasoning was sound, I reached over and grabbed the entire dish. I tossed one in my mouth and leaned back, closing my eyes in pleasure. Mmm... It was the first thing I'd tasted other than mold and blood in roughly a year, after all.

"Harry... are you alright?" his words were quiet as he looked me over. Looking at our surroundings for a moment, I gave him a look that I typically reserved for Bella when she was at the peak of her insanity. He sighed.

"What happened to your throat, Harry?" He asked instead, frowning as he looked down at my still-bruised neck.

"You should see the other guy," I replied with a chuckle, stuffing a few more of the candies into my mouth. These things are pretty good, but I'll never say it.

He frowned further at my words before his eyes slid over my emaciated frame. "Harry, where did that cloak come from?" So many questions today!

"Tesco's," I replied immediately, forming the multiple candies in my mouth into a confectionery ball and rolling it around with my tongue. I finally glanced up and sighed at his expression. Well I thought it was funny. "You probably don't want to know."

Dumbledore sighed and leaned back in his chair, assessing me for a long moment while I happily destroyed the dish of candies. I wonder if I can get them to take some of these to Bella... probably not. "Do you know why I'm here Harry?" the old man asked quietly, interrupting my musings.

"Probably has something to do with that prophecy," I fired back immediately, glancing up at him.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Harry."

Of course you don't. "I see."

His chest rose in a long, slow breath while he closed his eyes. Finally opening them and looking at me once more, he pulled out a familiar book – no, journal – and set it on the table. I hissed and stood quickly, making the Aurors in the back of the room immediately train wands on me. "What the hell is that doing here?" I snarled, glaring at the book hatefully. Ginny...

"I have managed to convince the Wizengamot that this artifact is responsible for your actions," Dumbledore quietly replied, disregarding my outburst. "We now believe it possessed you and forced your actions that fateful evening."

Is he serious...? Oh, this is rich! I suddenly burst into thick gales of laughter, gripping the table for support and grinning at him madly. "They actually bought that load of tripe?" He's even better than I thought!

He frowned deeply and made a gesture with his hand, and I heard the Aurors leave the room. "Yes, Harry. It is what happened, whether you believe it or not." You're so full of shit and we both know it. What's your game, old man?

Seeing that I was waiting for an explanation, he offered a small smile and continued. "You really must thank Mr. Longbottom. Without his assistance it would have been very difficult to procure your release." I stared at him, and he sighed before continuing, "He was instrumental in re-opening the Chamber for our investigation. We found this book inside the cavern among... other things. I truly wish you had been more forthcoming with your explanation of the events that night, Harry... we could have avoided all of this." He gestured to the citadel around us.

Like hell we could have. I sank back down into my chair and grumbled something about his lineage under my breath while stuffing a few candies into my mouth. "You want something from me, just say it," I muttered after a moment.

"I want nothing from you other than for your continued education, Harry," he replied quietly.

He's actually serious... "You want me to return to Hogwarts?" I couldn't hide my surprise, and a candy nearly slipped from my open mouth before I recovered.

"Yes, Harry. I want to place all of this unfortunate business behind us," he continued firmly.

Hmm... return to Hogwarts where he can keep an eye on me, or stay in Azkaban... I knew I could escape eventually, but it would be infinitely easier to move around if I had an actual pardon from the

Ministry. He won't control me Bella, by blood and magic I swear it. A surge of dark fire swelled in me at my silent promise, and I gave the old man across from me a barely-perceptible nod. I'll play along for now, old man.

He smiled widely and I stifled the urge to curse at him openly. Standing, he pulled out a length of golden chain and held it forward. "Shall we put all of this behind us then, Harry?" he asked jovially.

No. I stood slowly, staring at the chain and considering my possible life beyond these dark halls. Azkaban had hardened me; it had been a test of will and I had succeeded where few could claim the distinction. A fortress now stood within my mind where once only ruins of uncertainty had been found. My magic was closer to the surface than it had ever been, filling me with purpose and a drive to become what I was meant to be without regard to the costs.

No more compromises, no more blind following. I won't be caged again. I'd die before I returned to Azkaban, and it'd be with a smile on my face. This world can do its worst.

Smirking at the man before me, I gripped the chain.

A/N: Prologue complete.

Please read and review.

Chapter I

A muted blue flash heralded my return to civilization.

We arrived in what I assumed was a small antechamber inside the Ministry. Glancing around, I noticed there were two Aurors standing near the only exit to the room. I started for the door before a hand rested on my shoulder and was immediately removed. I truly love this cloak.

"A moment, Harry," Dumbledore murmured, undeterred. I turned to him and fixed him with a bored look. "There are some necessary forms you will need to sign, if you would follow me?" He asked, offering me what was probably supposed to be a reassuring smile that only served to increase my annoyance.

Mumbling my assent, I let him lead me through the door. To my surprise, there weren't any press in the hallway we entered – though I still pulled up the thick cowl of my cloak over my head. A numbing cold settled about me and I closed my eyes for a moment to revel in the feeling as we walked.

"Nice job with the lack of reporters," I complimented as we continued down the hallway.

"Indeed, by happy circumstance the newspapers seem to believe you will not be released until this time tomorrow," Dumbledore stated, turning into another room and waving over a clerk with multiple forms. I was shown a table and seated before the papers were slid in front of me. "If you would simply sign these, Harry?"

Of course, after I read them. I thought sarcastically, having to squint to read as my glasses were in a rather pathetic state. A single lens remained, while one of the arms was held on by a bit of tied hair – I wasn't really sure if it was mine or Bella's. Petition for a Ministry pardon, agreement not to leave the country for a full year... the forms seemed rather reasonable and I signed them, continuing to others.

Emancipation form? Makes sense I suppose, this way they can try me as an adult if I commit another offense. Not to mention I don't believe they can even incarcerate me without the assumption that

this form was signed. Must be a formality. I thought with a chuckle. At least I can cast magic outside of school.

Only a single form remained, and I pulled it to me. Acknowledgement of the seizure of assets... my thoughts trailed off as I stared at the page before me, turning and glaring at the old man to my side. "What the fuck is this?" I snarled.

"A necessary concession to secure your release, Harry," Dumbledore murmured, returning my gaze impassively. "Your family fortunes were donated to the victims of your crimes – specifically the remaining family of the Dursleys and the Aurors you killed, along with the Ministry."

"But I didn't commit any crimes according to your ridiculous story," I growled, staring at him. I needed that money, it was mine! My plans for my family fortunes had become increasingly elaborate ever since I had learned of their existence. How dare he let the Ministry take it! I disregarded the payments to the families, as I truly doubted that was where the lion's share of the accounts had gone.

"Regardless Harry, the donations helped to... what is the charming muggle phrase? Grease the wheels?" Dumbledore queried then nodded. "Yes, I do believe that is it. Do not worry Harry; you're a very talented young wizard and should have no trouble finding adequate employment in the future. Additionally, I managed to insure you retained control of your trust vault," he continued, placing a small key on the table next to me. I snatched it and tucked it into my cloak.

"Yes, because I can live off fifteen thousand galleons for the rest of my life," my disdain was palpable and I saw him frown.

"Ten thousand, Harry. I took the liberty of having your next four years tuition paid from the account earlier," Dumbledore continued and I boggled at him. "I would ask that you bear in mind many great wizards and witches started with no such funds and became quite successful," he added sternly.

Does he expect me to be like a damnable Weasley? Struggling with my finances for my entire life? I snarled internally, barely resisting the urge to curse at the man. I refuse to be some poor sod, I am a Potter! I am a scion of a pureblood line!

Signing the form with an almost violent motion I stood up and glared at the old man before the pompous clerk from earlier came forward and collected the forms. Bright red hair... speak of the devil. "Mr. Potter," the clerk addressed me and I fixed him with a glare as well – he at least had the grace to flinch, "The Ministry wishes to apologize for your incarceration and offer you this compensation."

This better be good. I held out my hand as he offered a small package. Opening it, I stared at a pouch of floo powder wrapped in a piece of cotton. I'm going to raze this government to the ground one day. A plume of flame danced up my spine at the prospect. "You can compensate me by returning what you've stolen—" I started.

"Additionally, here are the effects you had on your person at the time of your arrest," he continued over me, handing me another box. That completed, he gave Dumbledore a nod and swept from the room. I was mildly surprised he didn't explode from the intensity of the glare I gave to his back. I should have gotten his name.

Glancing down at the box in my hands, I opened it to find oversized clothing and the single item I wanted from the contents. I snatched the watch that Ginny had given me and tossed the rest of the contents aside carelessly. "I'm done here, I'll see you September first," I growled to Dumbledore before heading for the door.

"Harry," he called and I forced myself to stop despite wanting nothing more than to continue walking. "You must know I don't plan to let you go unsupervised," he continued calmly. Of course I know that, but I'm going to fight you tooth and nail over it.

"I am an emancipated minor," I replied, turning and leaning against the door. "It is fully within my rights to do as I damned well please so long as I act in accordance with your Ministry's precious laws," I continued in something between a drawl and a sneer.

"Indeed, Harry," Dumbledore stated and gave me a hard look, "however, I have no plans to allow you to remain unsupervised. I would ask that you accept this condition in light of what I have done today."

Accept the babysitting because we both know you're a murderer and I need the assurance you won't go on a muggle killing spree again.

You should accept this because I just used my considerable influence to get you out of prison. I translated mentally, sighing and deciding to try to bargain. "Give me a day to get my affairs in order and then I will agree to your babysitting," I offered.

The aged wizard frowned at me for a moment, "No, Harry," he murmured then raised a hand to stop the tirade forming at my lips. "Perhaps you should meet your escort for today before we continue this conversation? I do not believe her presence will be particularly upsetting to you," He finished in a slight smile that immediately put me on edge.

Her? I watched as he walked over to the door and knocked on it once. He stepped out as it opened and a pink-haired woman entered. My thoughts stopped the moment I saw her; she looked incredibly nervous.

"Wotcher, Harry..." Tonks murmured quietly. Her hands twitched once towards me and I caught it. For the first time in a year, a smile broke out on my face that wasn't forced in the slightest.

I made a grandiose gesture of stretching my arms out to the side then cocked my head at her. "You going to stay over there or—" I was suddenly cut off as a pink missile struck me at speed, very nearly knocking me down. "Hey Tonks," I murmured quietly, wrapping her in my arms and pressing my face into her hair. Autumn...

She clutched at me and I felt her shoulders begin to shake slightly. Don't cry Tonks... if you do, you'll get me started and I'll never forgive you. Deciding to head her off, I teased, "Blubbering on me already?"

"Git," she grumbled, squeezing me tighter and making the mistake of burrowing her face into the cloak at my neck. She immediately jumped back, "Bloody hell that thing is cold!" It seems the cloak does have a downside... bother.

"But it's quite fashionable," I argued and she sighed, wiping her eyes.

"Maybe in Azkaban," the pink-haired witch muttered then gave me a grin when I opened my arms once more. "Oh no, no more hugs for you. Sorry Harry, but you bloody stink right now."

Attempting to pout, I gave her my most pathetic look. She flinched; I sighed. "Fine, let's get out of here," I groused and stepped past her towards the door.

Tonks grinned at me and fell into step as we headed for what I assumed was the floo exits. "So..." she started then faltered; her grin slipped as her hair shifted to a shade of mousy brown for a moment. She's unsure, not that I blame her. Damn hard to come up with a topic for conversation considering where I've been lately.

"How's the training going?" I asked, throwing her a bone and smiling as her pink hair returned with a vengeance. It's actually more red than pink...

"Bloody tests are ridiculous! They're bustin' my ass!" she grumbled immediately and I couldn't hide a smile. "And the damned obstacle courses! They expect us to be able to not only dodge spells from two training dummies while diving from cover to cover, but hit the bloody targets with stunners at 70% accuracy! They might as well just bugger us all with a..." Gods I've missed her.

We used the floo to travel to the Leaky Cauldron, and I helped her up from the floor. She still face-plants after floo travel. The thought brought a slight smile to my face as I made a beeline for Gringotts. Looking up at the imposing bank only drove home the loss of my own wealth, however, and the smile fell away immediately.

"I can't believe that doddering old fool let the Ministry rob me blind..." I grumbled under my breath some moments later. Truthfully I could believe it, but perhaps I wanted some sympathy from my company.

"Personally I'd rather ya be broke and free than rich and incarcerated," Tonks replied dryly. So much for sympathy.

"It's the principle of the matter!" I protested, stepping into Gringotts and attempting to ignore the stares of the other patrons. "You'd think they'd never seen a recent Azkaban tenant," I added under my breath.

Tonks must have heard me, as she stared at me for a moment before shaking her head and muttered, "Never change, Harry."

Approaching a teller, I stared down at him before the goblin seemed to notice me. "Harry Potter. I wish to inquire about the status of my family accounts – bring me Griphook," I barked.

The runt had the nerve to sneer at me before replying, "The Potter accounts have been seized by the Ministry and dissolved."

A cold wind began to rage deep in my breast as I glared down at the creature before me; to this point, I'd been holding out the smallest hope that this was all some ridiculous ruse or exaggeration. "Listen to me, you sniveling little—"

"Harry..." Tonks warned.

"Mr. Potter," a familiar voice called, and I swung my glare to a new goblin approaching me from one of the doors at the rear of the bank. "If I may have a word?"

I sighed and nodded, giving a parting glare to the first goblin as I approached the second. "Of course Griphook, this one certainly wasn't getting me anywhere," my disdain was apparent in my tone as I hooked a thumb to the clerk beside me.

Griphook had the grace to agree with me, settling a glare on the teller from before and guiding Tonks and myself through to his modest office. "Allow me to be the first to apologize to you, Mr. Potter. I was unable to stop the Ministry's seizure of your accounts," the goblin stated after sitting at his desk and gesturing to two seats across from him.

"So you're to blame for allowing this to—" I started, rising to my full height and glaring down at the goblin.

"Harry!" Tonks warned again, gripping my hand and jerking me down into the seat. I gave her a glare that broke the moment she locked eyes with me. Damn her. It was mildly distressing to find how easily she could disarm my anger.

"Regretfully Mr. Potter, I was unable to find a way to resist the Ministry's seizure. The Potter accounts were my largest and oldest responsibility as you well know, and I assure you it wounded me nearly as much as you to see them fall into outside hands." At least

he sounds sincere – which he should be, considering the commission he likely lost as the manager of the investments.

Leaning back and blowing out a sigh, I realized no one in this room was to blame for my predicament. Griphook was always honest with me, ever since the first time I came to the alley... Tonks gave my hand a squeeze that broke me away from my reminiscing before she continued for me, "So... why did ya wanna meet with Harry if you couldn't do anything?"

"That information is confidential," the goblin replied immediately, fixing Tonks with a frown.

"She's with me. It's alright," I muttered distractedly, still trying to come to terms with all that I had lost. There were over two million galleons in that account...

"Very well, Mr. Potter," Griphook murmured, leaning back in his own chair and waiting until I looked at him before giving me a very toothy smile. "Were you aware that Sirius Black made you his sole heir prior to the time of his death?"

What? "I beg your pardon? Why haven't you told me this before?" I asked, my expression dissolving into a glare. Distantly I felt Tonks squeeze my hand tightly in surprise at the goblin's words.

"I will get to that soon. Indeed, Mr. Black left a will clearly stating that you were to inherit the Black lordship and estate the moment you assumed majority. However, as you can imagine, this was hotly contested by his remaining family. All members of the Lestrangle family were incarcerated or on trial at the time, in addition to having no direct heir, so they were unable to object. A misses Narcissa Malfoy, however, had a strong case..."

"Cissy, Bella's younger sister..." I mused, ignoring Tonks' gasp.

"Yes," Griphook nodded, assessing me for a moment. "As she already had a son at the time, she argued that young Draco Malfoy should inherit the Black estate. Being the youngest daughter and of a secondary family line, her claim was weakened however..." the goblin leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingers in his lap.

"Spare me the specifics," I finally growled, cursing myself for leaning forward in interest.

"Very well, Mr. Potter," Griphook grinned at me, "The short of it is that, in the end, the Ministry hearing decided that both of you had equal claim. Succession laws were invoked by which the first child to reach majority would claim the title. This is the reason I had not mentioned it to you before, as when last we spoke you were in no position to lay claim."

I paid no attention to his last statement, as I was still reviewing the first. The first to reach... A wicked grin spread over my face, and I noticed Tonks glancing between my expression and the goblin's for a moment. "One of you lot gonna fill me in?" she finally asked, exasperated.

"Draco is older than me. Therefore, he would have assumed lordship of the Black estate before me – which is likely why Narcissa didn't argue the case further..." I waited for Griphook to nod before continuing, "However, as the Ministry incarcerated me, they were forced to grant me emancipation. By their own ridiculous laws..." I couldn't finish, as I fell into a fit of maniacal laughter. Oh this is perfect!

Griphook interceded on my behalf and gave Tonks toothy smile, "What Mr. Potter is trying to say is that he will very soon be the new Lord of Black."

Tonks blinked and stared at me as I managed to get a handle on my mirth, "Don't you see Tonks? They tried to ruin me! They took the Potter accounts, and they only succeeded in giving me more money and power than I've ever dreamed of!"

"Indeed, by incarcerating Mr. Potter they granted him legal majority, thus allowing him to make a claim on the Black estate that precedes young Mr. Malfoy," Griphook continued, reaching into his desk and pulling out several thick piles of parchment. "I've taken the liberty of drawing up the claim forms in the hope that you will keep me on as your account manager, Mr. Potter."

I couldn't resist a smirk at the greed shining in the goblin's eyes, "I don't believe that will be a problem, Griphook." His answering smirk

would likely have scared the hell out of me a year ago. Not quite a warden's stare, and besides... greed is something I can work with.

After signing the papers, Griphook took them and set them on his desk. "I will place a rush processing on these forms that shouldn't take more than a few hours. After which, you will need to return to accept the Black family ring and allow us to review your new properties and accounts," the goblin stated, and I nodded to him.

"I'll be cleaning out my trust vault before I leave, then," I murmured, glancing down at my tattered gray robes for the first time since my release. I really need a wardrobe. And a wand.

"Of course, Mr. Potter."

"You've been really quiet," I offered to Tonks as we left Gringotts, a small enchanted bag secured to my waist beneath the cloak.

"Huh? Oh, just thinking..." she trailed off. She'd been giving me glances for the better part of the last hour. "So, Lord Black huh?"

"Indeed," I replied happily, glancing around at the overly-bright alley around us before pulling out my watch. "Almost lunch time, my treat?" I offered.

"Lunch, eh? Sure, I can go for a bite..." she trailed off as a brilliant flash of white appeared before us, and I glared at the newly-arrived patronus. It looked to Tonks for a moment before disappearing, and I saw her pale slightly.

"It was Mad-Eye. I've gotta go, they think they've found some of the guys responsible for the attack and there's a raid about to..." she trailed off as I cleared my throat loudly and gestured to the small crowd of people around us. She flushed to the tips of her ears. "Erm... thanks for stopping me there, but yeah," she continued in a much quieter voice. Attack...? I decided to ask her later, as she seemed hurried.

"You'd best get going then, no?" I asked with a grin, unable to feel too terribly annoyed by this development. Not that I don't like her company, I thought. I simply wasn't one to enjoy being escorted; it was the principle of the thing.

"I'm not supposed to let you out of my sight," she argued, crossing her arms and looking down the alley towards the Leaky Cauldron. Probably wants to fire-call Dumbledore... time to be persuasive.

"It's Diagon Alley. What trouble could I possibly get into?" I replied while attempting to feign innocence with the sweetest look I could muster. This really hurts my face. Realizing she wasn't buying it, I dropped the expression and pushed on, "Look, all I'm going to do is make some purchases and get a room at the tavern for a shower. I'll meet you there later, alright? Moody didn't strike me as the patient type." Understatement.

She glanced at the entrance to a darkened alley nearby for a moment before looking back to me. "Harry... promise me you won't get into any trouble," she finally murmured, staring me down.

Sighing, I nodded. "I won't be going back to Azkaban, Tonks," I offered with a slight smile. Unless it's to free Bella.

"That wasn't what I asked and you bloody well know it!" she snapped and I blinked. "Look... just stay out of trouble, alright? For me?" she asked softly as her gaze locked onto mine. Damn her!

"...Alright," I finally conceded and she smiled, giving me a hug. "Be careful," I added quietly.

She pulled back and nodded. "See ya later, and for Merlin's sake get that damned shower soon!" she called with a grin as she wandered to an apparition point and disappeared over my rather vocal objections. I don't smell that bad!

Nearly the entire content of my trust vault was spent that day.

First I had made for Ollivander's to purchase a new wand. The old wand maker had simply stared at me for a long moment then murmured, "You've killed, Mr. Potter." Before I could argue or make a sarcastic remark, he had reached deep behind his counter and pulled out a dusty wand case, stating, "That will be ten galleons."

I had paid Ollivander for the wand and left without a word. Once outside, I'd opened the case and found a white wand along with a tag that read Twelve inches, ash and thestral hair. Odd combination... I had thought, though to my surprise a wave of the

wand produced a shower of blue and violet sparks. The first proper spell I cast with it was a cleaning charm, three of them in fact.

After that, things had been much more mundane though quite a bit more costly. I had purchased an enchanted trunk and a full wardrobe of the most expensive materials available in addition to several Hogwarts texts and a new pair of glasses. Next I had visited a potions shop and bought a dozen full-dose vials of nutrient potion to supplement my diet for the coming days. All of my purchases I placed into the trunk and shrunk it to carry in my pocket. I was still annoyed that it had taken me three attempts to complete the shrinking spell, but my pride demanded I place the blame on my new wand.

My shopping complete, I had gone to the Leaky Cauldron and rented a room to shower and change. Afterwards, dressed in my new overly-expensive robes of entirely wasteful finery, I headed back to Gringotts for my meeting with Griphook.

I'm beginning to see why Malfoy prefers Acromantula silk robes. I mused to myself as I stepped into Gringotts and started across the open bank floor. They're quite comfortable. My warden's cloak was worn over the dark silk, and I reveled in the numbing cold that warded off the mid-summer heat.

There was a time when dressing such as this would have put me off; I would have labeled such overt displays of wealth as foolish and pointless. Now however, with Bella's words still ringing in my ears, they seemed like the perfect garments. I'm better than these people, and they should know it. I thought with a slight smirk, fingering the cuff of my white silk shirt worn beneath the darker robes.

I swept past the other patrons and walked pointedly into the back of the bank, paying no mind to the objections of a few tellers. Arriving at Griphook's office, I rapped on it twice before walking inside and seating myself without invitation. The goblin gave me a slight glare that didn't manage to break the smirk on his face. He's too pleased to be bothered, the claims must have gone through without a hitch.

"Greetings, Mr. Potter. May I say you have certainly put your trust funds to good use," the goblin started, and I waved a hand to cut him off.

"You needn't waste your breath on flattery with me," I objected, then gave him a smirk and continued, "I'd much prefer you used it to inform me of your success in making us rich."

After treating me to the scraping sound that passed for a goblin's laugh, Griphook nodded and spoke, "All of the claim forms have gone through and I have the necessary paperwork acknowledging you as the new Lord of Black," he slid over a thick sheaf of parchment to me, "if you would sign these, Mr. Potter."

Skimming the pages, I nodded and added my signature where needed and finally pushed the stack back to the goblin. In return, he slid a small box across the table to me. "Also, Mr. Potter, I have a copy of the will of Sirius Black," he pulled out an envelope and I waved a hand to stop him.

"You needn't bother reading it. I neither knew him nor care what he has to say to me," I stated, opening the small box and admiring the Black family ring. My godfather left me with Dumbledore and ran off to get himself killed rather than fulfill his duty to me. The fact that he saved my life is just enough to keep me from pissing on his grave.

Griphook nodded at me and slid the envelope across his desk. I tucked the will into my robes distractedly before pulling the Black ring from the box and slipping it onto my finger. A torrent of flame bloomed in my chest and rushed to my hand, causing the single large inlaid emerald to flare brightly and illuminate the family crest engraved within. Beautiful.

"Congratulations, Lord Black," the goblin offered, and I couldn't hide my smile.

"This is irregular..." Griphook murmured suddenly.

We had been going over the many Black accounts and properties for the better part of the last hour, and I was currently looking through a ledger of past investments and attempting to make sense of it. Definitely going to have to look into some books on accounting and investment strategies.

"Hmm?" I responded, flipping a page and glancing up when the goblin made an annoyed sound in his throat.

"One of these properties is suspect. I can't seem to read the name of it in this listing," Griphook continued, and I rolled my eyes.

"Whoever recorded it must have poor penmanship, then," I replied dryly.

The goblin shook his head and gave me a mild glare, "No, the words seem legible, but I can't make them out." He slid the book across to me and I took it from him, glancing down at the property in question and raising an eyebrow. The text is... shifting. I could read the words, but they didn't seem to register in my mind.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked him, handing back the book and leaning forward.

"I suspect some concealment ward has been erected on the property. Luckily, Gringotts keeps a separate listing of other properties or distinguishing landmarks near the major manor houses exactly for this purpose," Griphook stated, pulling out another book from the piles near his desk.

"The Black Manor is the property in question?" I queried, unable to hide my surprise.

"Indeed, it would seem it is in use," Griphook replied, finding the listing in his book and glancing up at me. "We may need to retake the property. The family ring should allow us to pass whatever wards have been erected over the existing enchantments."

"I will summon a team of guards, as I would assume you would rather leave Ministry Aurors out of this," the goblin finished, standing. "Your presence will be required to breach the concealment ward, Lord Black," he added, waiting for my nod before leaving the room.

Who would dare try to steal my new manor? I leaned back and drew my wand, admiring the white ash for a moment. I suppose it doesn't matter. This wand needs breaking in, anyway. My smirk was quite feral as I stood to leave.

Sometime later, I found myself standing in the middle of a muggle street with a small company of goblins. Notice-Me-Not charms were a given.

"Are you certain this is the place?" I asked Griphook slowly, glancing around at the neighborhood and unable to stifle a wince. The House of Black, sequestered among muggles...

"I am positive, Lord Black," Griphook replied, looking at a small map and comparing it to a book he carried, "indeed, the Black Manor should be directly in front of us. I would suggest attempting to use the family ring to call to the wards."

Giving the goblin a slightly dubious look, I looked ahead at the small muggle alley in front of us. I'm going to look like a damned fool if this doesn't work. I thought darkly, though I raised my left hand and fisted my fingers, turning the ring forward. Reaching into myself, I called to my magic and attempted to use the ring as a focus much as I would a wand.

Nothing happened.

Fucking... I glared at the ring, my annoyance causing a cool wind to blow up my spine. I splayed my fingers and brought the ring higher, snarling, "I am the Lord of Black and you will reveal yourself to me!"

The inlaid emerald flared into brilliance just as a maelstrom of blues and golds illuminated the alleyway before us. Streamers of power arced into the air as ancient wards stirred and rose to my call. I felt a rush of power suffuse me as my awareness extended to encompass what I could only guess was the surrounding area. Am I sensing the wards...? The air before us began to distort and clouded all visible in a haze of magically-induced fog.

A torrent of flame rushed from my chest down to the Black ring, causing my eyes to widen as the emerald flashed brilliantly once more. Gouts of viridian fire bloomed in the fog and began to consume it. Did I just tear down the concealment ward? I must research warding! I assumed the family ring and the older, pre-existing manor wards had done most of the work, though the enchantments that fueled them had to be fascinating.

The occluding fog began to dissipate as the ring flashed, revealing tall gates of dark metal before us. Beyond the gates lay a courtyard and a towering manor house, all of which looked like they hadn't been tended in over a decade. Which is likely true... this place is a mess.

Stepping forward, I rested my hand against the massive gates. A muted flash illuminated the inlaid Black family crest carved into the iron before they slid open, and my entourage and I stepped forward into the inner courtyard. Did the elves responsible for this property die? This is a disgrace!

Presently we came to the main doors to the manor, and they opened to my hand just as the gates before them. Three goblins in splint mail stepped forward and waved me to hold as they entered, though I rolled my eyes and followed them immediately with Griphook at my side. "I will need to acquire some house elves it would seem," I murmured offhandedly, holding my wand in my right hand.

Griphook nodded up at me as he looked around at the dusty surroundings. "Indeed, Lord Black. If there are any elves remaining on the property, they should be able to summon more of their kind to be bonded," the goblin offered, and I nodded distractedly.

Passing through the foyer, we walked deeper into the house and came to what I assumed was the parlor. A massive staircase descended from the back wall and broke into separate stairs that rose to what I assumed were the upper floors, of which I guessed there were four total. Dusty couches and chairs lay haphazardly about a large fireplace that was currently unlit.

"This place is a disgrace," I muttered, reiterating my earlier thoughts as I walked towards the large staircase in the back of the room. Less than half the way up, the curtains of a portrait at the middle landing flew open. She looks even more horse-like than Aunt Petunia...

"More invaders!" the woman screeched, "come to further violate my noble house, no doubt! Kreacher! Kreacher!"

Narrowing my eyes in swelling anger, I brandished the family ring and snarled, "Silence! You will address me with respect!"

The woman's eyes widened almost comically in her frame as she beheld my emaciated form dressed in my finery and brandishing the Black crest on my finger. Any remark from the portrait however was cut off as a thundering noise came from the stairs above. Two goblins dashed up the stairs and stood at the landing next to me, leveling their spears at the newcomers.

"What the bloody hell was that racket?"

"Did the portrait open again?"

"Honestly you two, she gets opened constantly... him!"

A Weasley, a Longbottom and a Granger... in my house! Apoplectic rage settled deep in my breast. These are the squatters!

"My lord! You must remove this rabble at once! I fear... I fear they are blood traitors and mudbloods!" the portrait screeched from beside me, "Squatters! Squatters in the House of Black! The shame!"

"Silence," I bit out to the portrait and glared at my classmates above me, though I was cut off by another door opening below and expelling a rather rotund redheaded woman and a gaggle of her offspring by my reckoning. More Weasleys!

"What's going on here...?" the Weasley matron started before trailing off as she beheld me.

"All of you. Get the fuck out of my house," I bit out, barely keeping leash of my anger. The rosary began to pulse at my throat, offering an outlet to the torrent of fire inside of me. The temperature of the room began to fall.

Granger recovered first and fixed me with a frown. "Professor Dumbledore told us we could stay here. It's the safest place after the attack," she stated and I fought the urge to curse her. How dare she question me!

"Listen to me you little mudblood—"

"Don't call Hermione that, you bloody murderer!"

"I'll get to you in a minute, Weasley—"

"H-How did you get into this house? It's under the Fidelius charm!" the mother Weasley started, and I spun to glare down at her.

"Not anymore. I tore it down, this is my home!" I snarled and her eyes widened before she bolted from the room. Probably to fire-call Dumbledore, there must be another fireplace. Bother.

"I-I can't believe he let you come here, he said he was going to put you somewhere else..." Longbottom started, obviously referring to Dumbledore. So the mighty savior knew of my release.

"I wasn't let anywhere," I growled, then turned and leveled my wand as a pop appeared less than three feet from me. The goblins spun and brandished their poleaxes at the newly arrived elf. My eyes widened slightly at the apparent age of the thing.

"Mistress called..." he trailed off and fixed me with a glare – I was standing closest to the portrait, after all. "More filthy mudbloods bothering mis—"

I cut the elf off with a banishing hex and sent him flying into a nearby banister; he struck it at speed and crumpled to the floor. "You will address me as master," I bit out, leveling my wand at the creature. The grayed head slowly lifted and stared at the ring flashing at my side. "This house is a disgrace. You shame the House of Black!" I snarled and banished him again, sending him tumbling to the bottom of the staircase. It felt good to vent some small fraction of my anger.

Granger was screeching like a banshee. I pointedly ignored her.

"You will go and find younger ones of your kind and bring them forth to be bonded," I growled to the elf, descending the stairs as it tried to pull itself to its knees in some semblance of a bow. "You have obviously grown too incompetent to handle the responsibilities," my words were biting, and the elf visibly wilted at my feet before popping away.

"My lord, the squatters!" the portrait reminded me and I closed my eyes for strength before glaring at the invaders around me.

"I told you all to get the fuck—"

"Enough, Harry."

Great. I thought sarcastically, spinning to face the newest arrival and his bright cerulean robes. Figured he'd be showing up just as I got

into stride... "Just in time! You can help me explain to these fools why they need to get out of my home!" I snapped to Dumbledore, and he sighed deeply. I noticed him staring at the ring on my hand. He looks surprised... did he not anticipate this?

"Harry, there are things at work here that you do not understand," he started and I cut him off with a barked laugh.

"I agree! Such as why there are blood traitors and mudbloods in my home!" I snarled, hearing the portrait screech its agreement from the stairs. Distantly I noticed a side-door open, though I paid it no mind. "I want all of them to get the fuck out!" I reiterated, hearing the soft crickle-crackle of spreading frost as my magic raged.

"Harry!" If one more person interrupts— wait, that was Tonks. I spun and blinked as a pink-haired Auror rushed towards me. I waved the goblins to let her pass; she jogged up to me and glanced around before speaking, "What the buggering hell is going on? I just got here, Mad-Eye sent me to give a report to—"

"Nymphadora," Dumbledore interrupted and she flinched. Must be important if she didn't throw a fit over the name.

"Err... anyway, what are you doing here Harry?" she asked in a low whisper, and to my dismay I found my anger ebbing from her proximity. How does she do that?

"This is the Black Manor," I muttered, and she boggled at me before spinning on Dumbledore.

"You didn't tell me that!" she argued, "This is Harry's house. What are you lot all trying to kick him out for?" I'd never felt more grateful to her than at that moment. It didn't matter that she had absolutely no idea what was going on; simply the fact that she'd immediately sided with me over all the other gathered brought a rare swell of warmth to my breast.

"We've done no such thing, Nymphadora. I believe this is all a great misunderstanding," Dumbledore placated, cutting me off as I drew a breath to comment on his lineage, "Perhaps you should take young Harry aside and explain the recent developments?"

Tonks blinked and glanced at me before mumbling, "That's right... you don't know about the attack."

"What is this damned attack that everyone keeps going on about?" I snapped then immediately felt guilty as Tonks frowned at me. "Sorry," I muttered just loudly enough for her to hear, and she nodded.

"Come on, you owe me a late lunch anyway," Tonks whispered and I boggled at her as she grabbed my arm. Grabbed my wand arm too. Smart witch... I groused internally.

"You expect me to just leave while there are squatters in my home!" I asked her, though Dumbledore cut her off before she could reply.

"There are reasons for that, Harry. Rest assured the home is yours, though we will need to discuss the future of it at some point," the aged wizard murmured and I couldn't resist the urge to glare. Indeed we will. The future of my manor without ANY of you lot in it!

"Lord Black, will that be all?" Griphook finally asked – I'd honestly forgotten he was there. To my dismay, he had a mildly amused look on his face from the proceedings. Bastard goblin. "We'll be returning to Gringotts, if so," he continued.

"For now," I bit out, letting Tonks tug me towards the side room she had apparently entered from earlier, "Where are we going?" The portrait called after me in dismay, but I ignored it in favor of the witch in front of me.

"You're taking me to lunch and we're getting out of here before you bloody curse somebody and I have to arrest you again," Tonks muttered and I frowned at her, though I didn't argue.

We had taken the floo through a small fireplace in the back of the manor and exited into the Leaky Cauldron.

"Are you going to explain what's going on?" I grumbled as I helped her up from the floor. She stood and dusted herself off so quickly it was almost dizzying. Faster she gets up, less chance for people to see her on her bum I suppose. I thought with vague amusement.

"Stop grinning at me, and I will in a mo," she muttered and pulled me towards a small booth in the corner before tugging me down next to her. "I'm bloody starving, I skipped lunch," she explained.

"You know... I did too, come to think of it," I replied after thinking for a moment. Completely slipped my mind. The arrival of Moody's patronus and my subsequent shopping were to blame, I supposed.

"You shouldn't miss meals Harry, ya look like a bag of bones," she murmured, giving me a look.

"I haven't eaten anything save a few lemon drops in the last year, forgive me if I don't really think about food," I muttered before I could stop myself, immediately wincing at the stricken look on her face. Thankfully Tom the barkeep arrived just at that moment to take our orders.

Our orders taken, Tonks continued after the barkeep left, "Anyway, we haven't gotten much chance to chat today..." She dropped her voice and asked me quietly, "Are you alright, Harry?"

"I'm fine," I replied automatically. It was my conditioned response and she saw right through it.

"Sodding hell you are! What happened back there? You looked like ya wanted to curse everyone in sight..." she stated, leaning over the table slightly to stare at me. That's because I did.

"It was a... tense situation," I offered delicately and she blew out a gusty sigh.

"You're a damned bugger to get anything out of, ya know that?" she groused, accepting a butterbeer as the barkeep returned while I gleefully took a large mug of pumpkin juice. Sweet ambrosia at last!

"Mmm," I murmured as I took a long pull from the mug, though whether I was responding to her or simply exulting over the orange liquid pouring down my throat was anyone's guess.

Tonks grumbled as she sipped her drink and allowed me my moment of pumpkin-flavored ecstasy before I finally lowered the mug. "You in a place ya can hear me from, now?" she asked with

vague amusement. I made a show of considering her words and making furtive glances at the mug in front of me before nodding.

She snorted at my antics and stated, "Look... you know the Quidditch World Cup?" I stared at her and she sighed before continuing, "Right, ya don't give a damn about any sport because you're mental." I was in bloody Azkaban! At my frown, she pushed on, "Anyway, big international Quidditch deal. There was a Death Eater attack..." she trailed off. Interesting...

"What happened?" I prompted when she kept staring into her drink.

"There were deaths. Seven. Three muggles and some wizards and witches, seemed like they targeted the foreigners there for game... and Longbottom, they almost got him," she muttered and blew out a sigh before looking at me, her hair shifting to a mournful black, "The Ministry's in a right state over it."

"I'm sure that created some pressure from the foreign governments," I offered and she snorted. Longbottom is inconsequential.

"Yeah, that's a bloody understatement," Tonks muttered and took a sip of her drink, "anyway, that's why those lot were at your house..." She raised her wand suddenly and snapped off a privacy ward around us, and I raised an eyebrow. "Apparently it's a holdover from the last war. Had some big concealment ward on it, so they stashed Longbottom there," she murmured quietly, despite the ward around us.

Interesting... of course they'd secure their beloved savior. I thought darkly, forcing down the swell of twilight fire that danced in my breast. "That explains Longbottom, but what about the mud—" I stopped myself at Tonks' frown and forcefully filtered my speech, "...Granger and the Weasleys?"

She nodded at my choice of words then gazed somewhere off to the side for a moment before speaking, "Longbottom went to the games with them, and he insisted they stick with him apparently. Arthur was hit with a stray curse, nothing serious, but the lot of 'em will probably be staying there for a bit... Molly was in a right state after. Sorry Harry," she trailed off and gave me a lopsided grin, "I know ya don't get along with them." I snorted. Understatement.

Blowing out a sigh I took another pull from my drink and nodded distractedly. "I was sure Dumbledore would come up with some excuse to keep them there until all of this dies down anyway, and he'll no doubt prod me into accepting it..." Bella's words came back to me and bore with them a swell of hatred for the old man.

Tonks nodded and took a breath to speak before the privacy ward was crossed. We both leaned back in our seats as Tom deposited our food and left with a wave.

Taking a fork, I tucked into my shepherd's pie for a moment while Tonks worked on her lamb shank, each of us lost in thought. "Is Moody treating you right?" I asked after a moment then winced as she choked on a bit of lamb.

I swatted her on the back twice before she managed to clear the blockage. She glared at me and spoke, "Don't phrase it like that! Damn, ya make it sound like we're..." she shuddered visibly, "anyway, I get what you're saying, and yeah – I'm learning a lot." I suppose he's good for something.

"That's good..." I murmured quietly, taking another few bites of my food and assessing her for a moment as she worked on her potatoes. "If he gives you any trouble, come to me alright?" I asked after a long moment. I don't trust him. If it came to it, I wasn't above using my new lordship to put the screws to the Ministry in an attempt to have Moody released.

She boggled at me for a moment, a bit of her dinner roll hanging from her lower lip. Cute. "What are ya talking about, Harry?" she finally asked and I couldn't resist a chuckle.

"Don't worry about it. How have you been this last year?" I asked as I tucked into my food once more, though I kept my eyes on her. In truth, I was already feeling full – my stomach was likely shrunken to the size of an engorged pea by now.

Frowning at the subject change, she stared at me for a moment before she began to smile. "It's been great, I'm learnin' a lot! The academy's starting back up in full swing, though I don't gotta go that much with the old gaffer apprenticing me and all," She explained as she took a swig of her drink. "I've gotten in on a lot of field assignments..." She trailed off as I visibly winced.

Field assignments. Like Privet Drive... she took a breath to speak and I shook my head, locking my gaze onto hers as words came spilling from my lips, "Tonks... I'm sorry about that Imperius..."

She boggled at me for a moment before speaking, "Harry... you were possessed. You had no control over that!" She believes Dumbledore... the thought brought a spike of pain that pierced deep into my very being. All this time I had hoped she was picking up our friendship where it left off because she accepted me as I was, but in the end she was just ingesting the same lies the old man and I had fed to the rest of the world. She doesn't know I'm a murderer.

"Regardless..." I started quietly, managing to lock my eyes onto hers, "I'm sorry for it. Forgive me?" I need you to tell me I'm forgiven, Tonks. I don't give a damn about anyone else... I discounted Bella, as she certainly didn't care about my crimes.

"Harry..." she whispered, shaking her head before smiling at me brightly – my heart skipped a beat at the sight. "Of course I forgive ya," she concluded. Thank you.

Wiping my eyes of the few traitorous tears that had gathered, I sighed as she slid around the booth and pulled me into an embrace. "I thought this was supposed to go the other way around," I muttered, trying to regain my pride even as I leaned into her.

"It's alright, Harry. Not everyone can be a tough guy like me," Tonks quipped with a wide grin, and I couldn't resist a snort.

"Yeah, not all of us can be asked to look like McGonagall and survive," I retorted with a smirk of my own.

Her answering groan threatened to breach the silencing ward.

Days later found me sitting at the head of the informal dining table in my manor.

The elf, Kreacher, had brought three young elves for me to bond. Granger had thrown a fit over it that had forced the Weasley matron to drag her away lest I end up cursing her. In the end, the older elf had been training them and he assured me they were nearly ready to take up all of his duties. Two of the elves would split work

between the house and grounds, while a young female would be my personal elf. Hers was the only name I bothered to learn.

"Tilly," I barked, waiting for her to pop next to me before continuing, "bring me some coffee." It was breakfast, after all.

"Yeses Masters!" she stated excitedly and popped away, drawing a wry smirk from me. So happy to serve... I thought, ignoring the glares from the others assembled at my table. All of them congregated on the far end with as much possible distance between us, and that was perfectly fine.

"You could at least say please..." Granger growled and I sneered at her.

"Very well. Please cease your prattling," I retorted, chuckling as her face reddened in anger.

Tilly returned in short order with a steaming cup of coffee and the perfect amount of cream. I'd been experimenting with the drink lately after Tonks had offhandedly commented she often needed it to get through her mornings. Speaking of Tonks... I sighed quietly to myself; Moody had been working her quite hard the last few days over the attack on the World Cup. I had hardly seen her at all, and being cooped up in a house with Gryffindors was testing my restraint to its limits.

Dumbledore had spoken perhaps a dozen words to me since that evening in the parlor. As far as I knew, he was collecting necessary reagents to recast the Fidelius charm I had torn down and would be arriving this weekend for that purpose. He seems quite... distracted. He's up to something. I concluded, sipping my coffee slowly. Apparently with a new Lord of Black in the house and my connection to the wards, the existing enchantments were deemed sufficient for the time being to give us fair warning if an assault was to come. Bloody unlikely.

Leaning back in my chair, I sipped my coffee for a long moment and glanced at the copy of the Prophet in front of me. My release was front page material despite the recent attack on the Quidditch tournament. Ministry pardons Boy-Murderer... I read, snorting into my drink and taking a long pull of the piping hot liquid. Hogwarts is going to be so very fun this year.

Moments later, a pop heralded the arrival of an elf. "Yes, Kreacher?" I growled out – to be honest, I was still furious with the elf over the state of my manor. I'd assigned Tilly to clean out the top floor which I had claimed as my own, while the other two elves were frantically attempting to bring the rest of the manor up to approval.

"I... I has finished training Dibble and Binkin, Master," the elf murmured, standing on the edge of my table with his head bowed. I raised an eyebrow and he continued, "I... I is old, Master. Could Kreacher be put with other good elves in family room?"

Interesting... I thought, ignoring Granger's immediate objections and leaning back in my chair. I knew of the room he spoke of as I'd explored it just a day ago. He wants his head mounted.

"You believe you've earned this honor?" I drawled, mostly just to piss off Granger as Longbottom and Weasley struggled to restrain her.

"Yes Master! Kreacher has served the House of Black for all his life!" the elf fell to his knees and clutched at the cuff of my robes while I fought the urge to backhand him. "Please Master, let Kreacher rest... let him join good elves!"

All eyes in the room fell onto me as I stared at the elf's quivering form. It would piss off the others and he did at least train the new elves. I mused internally, staring at Kreacher for a long moment before murmuring, "Very well."

"Oh thank yous Master!"

"Absolutely not!"

"I forbid it!"

"You can't!"

"Don't you do it Potter–"

"Falx."

"Oh my God!"

The cleaving curse struck the elf's neck moments before I snatched his head from the air by one of its floppy ears, letting the body slump to the floor. "Tilly!" I barked, waiting on her to arrive and ignoring her horrified expression, "Clean up this mess."

Standing, I drained the last of my coffee and swept from the room with my cloak flowing behind me. Granger was in hysterics while the gaggle of Weasleys all shrieked their fury. Weak fools.

I strode directly to the family room and found a pedestal already prepared with Kreacher's name on the plate. Perhaps he was a good elf after all, as I certainly wouldn't have bothered if he hadn't already prepared this... I had studied the necessary preservation charms on a whim just in case this situation came up some days prior, and in short order I had a new freshly-mounted elf head sitting before me. It truly is a somewhat disturbing custom.

"You... you monster," a voice drifted from the doorway behind me and I sighed. I was wondering if she'd show up.

"Was there something you required, Granger?" I drawled, admiring Kreacher's head as it sat on the pedestal. I swear his eye just moved.

"How could you do that! How could you... just... just kill him?" she was shrieking at this point, and I turned and strode towards her. How dare you question me, in my own home no less! My magic swelled inside me in a raging conflagration of twilight fire.

I jabbed my wand pointedly into her stomach and she had the nerve to return the gesture. Glancing down at the darker wood of her wand currently pressing into my chest, I chuckled, "Underage magic, Granger?"

"I-It'd be my first offense," she whispered, her chocolate eyes boring into mine. I resisted the urge to dive into them and rend her venerated mind apart. "I'm not a-afraid of you," she continued quietly, drawing a bark of laughter from me that made her flinch. Then you're a damned fool.

"And what do you plan to do to me even if you do use that wand, Granger?" I drawled, and I saw the first flickers of hesitation enter

her eyes. "Would you like me to explain?" I asked, continuing before she could interrupt, "The spells you know... your wand will do one of a few things. If you use that wand, it will perhaps turn my legs to jelly," I sneered, glaring into her eyes.

"If you use that wand, it will perhaps render me immobile. If you use that wand, perhaps you'll drive me into unconsciousness for a few hours while the Weasley twins stuff my pockets with pranks!" I snarled, leaning in until our faces were inches apart. Distantly, I noticed she was shaking.

"Do you know what my wand will do to you, Granger?" My voice was low as I growled out my words, "My wand will entomb you in ice. My wand will dissolve your flesh in acid..." I trailed off, watching as the fear swam in her eyes. It strengthened me and stoked the inferno that blazed within my chest.

"My wand, Granger..." I whispered then snarled, "...will cleave you in half and send your filthy mudblood organs spraying over my pure floors!" I roared into her face, the rage in me cresting. I dove into her mind on instinct, ripping open the vaults of her memories and pouring a torrent of fire deep into her conscious. The image of a small girl sobbing under a sink flashed before my mind's eye.

What am I doing? I blinked suddenly and cut the connection, shaking my head and distantly noticing her collapsing to the floor as her wand clattered to the side. She was shivering uncontrollably from the mental assault.

I went too far. The realization was sudden, and as I looked back even I could realize I had overreacted. Granger flailed on the floor, managing to get her feet under her before she fled down the corridor. Her loud sobs trailed behind her. What have I done? I glanced down at my wand and watched as emerald sparks danced at the tip before they slowly faded. Did I come so close...?

Leaning against the doorframe, I closed my eyes and ran through all the occlumency exercises I knew. My magic was still churning in my breast and I fought it down with every ounce of my will. A will to shatter stars. I hadn't needed to resort to the mantra in over a year, yet it still took ten repetitions before the roiling flames within fell back to low embers. My eyes drifted to Granger's wand resting forgotten on the floor nearby, and I stared at it for quite some time.

Control yourself, Potter.

A/N: The Quidditch World Cup happened roughly one month earlier in this reality.

Chapter II

The sun was warm upon my face.

I was sitting in the conservatory of my manor, reclining in a chair while one of the elves cleaned the dirt-stained glass above me. My cloak and robes lay bundled to my side, while the sleeves of my white shirt were drawn back to my elbows.

It was likely I gave the very image of relaxation, with a tome laying open in my lap and my glasses dangling lazily from my hand - nothing could be further from the truth.

Three days had passed since my confrontation with Granger, and nothing had come of it at all. I had fully expected to be beset by at least a quartet of Weasleys and perhaps a sitting Hogwarts headmaster within moments of the girl's rather swift retreat. And nothing. Why?

Glancing towards my cloak, I saw the handles of two wands sitting just within reach of my right hand. One was a familiar white ash, while the other was a much darker shade. I did not know why I had picked up and kept Granger's wand after she had fled my presence, or for that matter why I hadn't had the elves place it into the rubbish bin – and yet there it sat, mocking me.

I should just leave it on the kitchen table. I mused to myself, though for some reason I hesitated. Perhaps I wanted her to come to me for it.

There are more important matters. My thoughts shifted, a frown coming to my face as I leaned back in the chair. Dumbledore will be coming today. I had received a letter the prior evening informing me of such, and I could think of multiple reasons. Recasting the fidelius was principle among these, but after much thought I had decided to refuse him. To this point I had tolerated these guests in my home at his request, but it was becoming increasingly apparent that to do so any longer was impossible.

He holds too much influence to directly oppose. I wondered if my defiance would provoke the old man to cut his losses with me – fabricated stories of innocence can easily become truthful tales of

guilt, after all. And he certainly has the capacity to make the masses believe either.

But if I end up killing one of them... I thought to myself, recalling emerald sparks dancing at the tip of my wand after my last confrontation with Granger. I can't be revealed for what I am, at least not yet. The lot of them staying would do just that – better I removed the complicating variables than risk the fate of being executed.

My thoughts inevitably brought me back to Granger. Why did I assault her mind? It had been something instinctual, my magic had flared within me along with my indignation – and the results were striking. On that matter... I considered my actions in the last few days – and while they were quite justified, some were foolish in many ways.

I must try to be more... tolerant. Superficially, of course. Better to bide my time, chipping away at my enemies from the shadows until finally they had naught left to take. Reciting Slytherin parables, Snape would be proud.

It's going to be hard, though. I thought darkly, glancing at Granger's wand for a moment. A door clicked softly behind me before un-oiled hinges creaked and drew a slight hiss from the new arrival. Frowning, I discreetly slid my hand into my cloak and wrapped it around my wand.

Soft footfalls drew closer to me, before I sensed the intruder sink into another chair nearby. Silence pervaded for several long moments, yet I kept my eyes studiously fixed upon the tome in my lap. Certainly not a Weasley. After the last few days, I had become convinced no one in the family could suffer more than two seconds' worth of silence without descending into inane rambling. Besides Ginny, of course.

"H-Harry..." A voice started, and I frowned. Speak of the devil... I wondered if you'd show up. "Can I have my wand back?" the voice continued hesitantly, so quiet I strained to hear it.

I remained silent, turning a page in the tome absently. The girl beside me shifted nervously, and I saw a pair of trembling, pale hands fidget with the hem of her skirt in my peripheral vision.

"Please?" she continued, and I finally sighed.

Withdrawing her wand from my cloak, I tossed it towards her direction. Now leave me be. I mentally commanded, trying to focus on the worn pages before me rather than the fidgeting of Granger and the soft squeaking noises of the elf cleaning the glass above us.

"Thank you," she whispered, and I spared a glance in her direction. She wasn't looking at me however, instead staring at her wand – apparently surprised that I hadn't snapped it. That makes two of us.

"Can you... fix this?" she asked after a few moments, and it was only then that I noticed her hands weren't trembling so much as... shaking. Shivering. I corrected, and I blinked. Still? After all of this time? What did I do to you, Granger...? I confess it was more curiosity than any genuine concern.

"It'll wear off in time," I finally spoke, turning another page in my book. Truly, I had no idea how to undo what I had done to her mind.

"It's been three days, Harry..." she whispered, and I glanced at her once more. Her eyes were averted from mine, downcast to stare at the wand she held in her lap.

"Why should I help you, Granger?" I bit out. The rising anger was easy, easier than admitting my ignorance at least. She flinched at my vitriol, gripping her wand tightly in both hands before slowly raising her gaze to mine – I had to admire her courage, at least.

"I didn't tell anyone," What...? "I... didn't want to get you in trouble again. Or me in trouble. Or... make a big deal of it," she explained in a swift babble, and I frowned. "Look Harry, I just... want to stop shaking. Please. I can't sleep, I'm cold all the time... I can't eat with the others or they notice, and–"

"Enough," I sighed, shutting the tome and finally turning to face her. She immediately averted her eyes, and I gave her a mild glare. Very well, if it will keep her silence... "Look at me, Granger." While I try not to compound the damage.

Her shoulders rose as she took a deep breath, then finally her brown eyes met my own. Gathering my magic, I dove into her thoughts with as much restraint as I could manage.

Looks well enough so far. I thought, brushing past a gauzy veil that seemed to serve as the only natural barriers her mind wielded. Inside her mind, however, was a much different reality.

Granger's mindscape appeared to me as a sporadic mess of bookshelves that seemed to vaguely resemble the library at Hogwarts, though much more untidy. The setting was hardly surprising considering the host; however the fires alighting the bookshelves were another matter. Drifting closer, I noticed many of the books were scorched, caked in frost or otherwise damaged. Interesting.

Wherever I ventured the flames would soar brighter, only to fall back to embers with my passage. A representation... is this a fragment of my magic? I mused, glancing around. Did I leave this here?

"Return to me," I whispered aloud into the halls of her mind, reaching out to the fires around me and spreading my arms. Swirling flames danced along the floors and walls as they rushed back into my being. Odd... I hardly felt it. It was possible the fragment was small, or simply deteriorated from the time spent away from its source.

Without the flickering darkness coating Granger's mindscape, the true extent of the damage was visible. Several of the books were scorched on the outside, while a section of one bookcase was entirely seared away. She seemed fine... perhaps these are older memories. It took only a moment's deliberation to decide against informing Granger of the damage. How do you know you're missing something if you don't know you ever had it at all? I certainly couldn't have her going around blabbering about how I'd raped her mind and destroyed some of her memories, after all.

That decided, I leaned my head back and bid my magic return me home.

"There," I spoke, leaning back into my chair as she collapsed back into her own.

"It's so good to feel warm again..." she whispered, and I fought the urge to snort. Leaning forward, she fixed me with a look that rapidly

descended into a glare. "I still think you're a monster. What you did to Kreacher was unforgiv—"

"Your opinion is the guiding force of my life, Granger," I snapped sarcastically, opening the tome once more and turning my shoulder away from her in an unmistakable sign of dismissal. Amazing how fast she can shift from docile to patronizing.

Granger huffed and to my annoyance kept her seat. Mentally preparing myself for a coming tirade, I closed my eyes as my magic bloomed inside of me. I can't kill her. Not yet. I can kill her later. Just not today.

"Look... Harry," she sighed, "I don't know if this is just that ridiculous Slytherin versus Gryffindor thing that you're projecting onto me or what, but..."

"Projecting?" I echoed, cursing myself as I involuntarily turned to boggle at her. Is she really so naïve?

Crossing her arms, she gave me a firm look that immediately raised my hackles. I should have left her to shiver. "Well, I don't know why you don't like me. It's obvious that you don't, though, and that's... fine," she finished, and I cocked my head. She acts like it bothers her... surely not. "...but you don't have to take it out on innocent elves!" she finished heatedly, and I confess to blinking at the conviction of her words.

"Innocent?" I mocked, rolling my eyes. "That elf likely spent the better part of his existence hiding the excesses of his mistress and cursing your kind whenever he had a free moment. Spare me your misguided pity, Granger."

"That's hardly the poi—" she was thankfully interrupted as the door opened again, and her mouth snapped shut as the newcomer surveyed us both with twinkling eyes – though I noticed his blue orbs took on a more shrewd glint as they fell upon me. I promise I didn't Imperius her.

"Good afternoon Harry, Hermione," Dumbledore stated with his typical good-natured attitude, walking into the room further. If he was surprised to find Granger and myself sitting in the same room, he didn't show it. "I do apologize dear girl, but could you excuse us for a

moment? Harry and I have many things to discuss and my time today is sadly limited," he offered with a smile, to which Granger flushed and nodded before exiting the room. I vehemently refused to admit that I was glad he had arrived and dispatched with her.

Sinking into the seat Granger had just vacated, he leaned back to assess me for a moment. My eyes stayed locked onto his, and I kept close watch on the barriers of my mind. I dare you to take a peek.

Dumbledore smiled after a moment, finally speaking, "It is good to see you taking in the sun, dear boy. I must say you've grown quite pale." I blinked slowly at him, taking a breath to explain that he knew very well why that was such, but he continued, "Now then, I have brought all necessary reagents to begin—"

"We will not be recasting the fidelius today, Chief Warlock," I murmured quietly. The choice of title was no accident; I wanted him to know that I was quite aware of his intervention in government on my behalf and the possible ramifications for me due to this choice of defiance.

"I see," he murmured after a moment, leaning back in his seat and assessing me, "If I may ask why?"

"Because it's my home, not theirs!" I snapped before I could stop myself, pushing on as he frowned deeply. "And because you're going to have a hell of a time keeping me out of Azkaban again if they stay here," I whispered seriously, our eyes still locked upon one another. No sense in keeping airs, we both know what I am.

Frowning deeply, the aged wizard tapped his fingers slowly on the armrest of the chair. "I see," he finally spoke at length, and I fought the urge to growl at him. That's hardly a response. Thankfully he pressed on before my thoughts turned darker, "Harry... you realize this arrangement is not one of convenience, but safety. There are forces at work here, ones that have sadly already claimed lives not some weeks prior. One of their targets is under this roof, which—"

"—is another reason for him to be gone!" I snapped, and he gave me a mild glare in response. "I want no part in these designs of yours, especially when they test my control at every end! I cannot turn a corner in my own home without running into one of those damnable Weasleys, or worse yet Longbottom's stuttering! All I want

is silence – peace!" I was ranting now, but I hardly cared. "How will you convince the Wizengamot that I was possessed again when one of them shows up missing a tongue—"

"Enough, Harry," Dumbledore snapped, a rare expression of true annoyance on his face. Quickly, however, his expression fell away to an impassive look that I forced myself to mirror. What I would give to see those eyes glassed over... "The wards on this property are ancient, and it remains the safest place for all involved," he continued firmly, and my anger finally crested within me.

"If they stay here they will likely die. The Dursleys and two Aurors have been lost already to your poor decisions, and I begin to wonder how many others!" I hissed, and judged by the flashing of his blue eyes that I had struck a chord. His chest rose as he drew breath to retort, and I pushed on before he could speak, "Pick your battles and I'll pick mine." My voice was hard, though the offer was genuine. I was willing to accept some of his decisions as long as he maintained his leverage over me, but I would stand firm on what I felt necessary. I will not be the blind pawn you are used to dealing with, old man.

Staring at me for a long moment, the headmaster finally voiced a question, "If you cannot restrain yourself with so few here, how can I trust you to do so at Hogwarts?"

So that's what this is all about, why he took so long to visit me... a test! What if I had failed it! I fought to quell the anger within me and the surge of power accompanying it, though I could tell by his deepening frown that he had noticed the falling temperature of the room. "At Hogwarts I will be able to distance myself from them and others like them. I will not be... caged with them as such!" I finally muttered, shaking my head and sighing before continuing, "I will not be a danger to your precious students." Whose welfare you obviously care for more than mine. I added mentally, disregarding how selfish it sounded.

Sighing deeply, the aged wizard finally spoke, "I want to believe you, dear boy. And it seems I must."

Taking a breath to object, I blinked as his words struck home. Did he just... agree to it?

"I have spent what little time I could spare in the last few weeks working to bolster the wards on the Burrow – the Weasley family home," he added for my benefit, though the name was already familiar to me due to Ginny, "I believe them to be sufficient for the time being. I only ask that you allow a few more days to give time for them to gather their belongings and for me to finalize my work on the wards."

"So long as a 'few more days' doesn't translate into a month, then that will be... acceptable," I acquiesced quietly. He gave up far too easily... what's his game now?

Dumbledore chuckled, and even I could tell it was merely an attempt to lighten the mood. "I dare say they will not be too upset at the prospect of returning home, Harry," he murmured, and I nodded slowly.

"And who will you be sending to monitor me in their absence?" I asked after a moment, giving voice to my suspicions.

The question did not appear to surprise him as he fixed me with a calculating gaze. "No one, Harry. However I will ask that you allow me to place a monitoring charm on your wand for purpo—"

"Absolutely not!" I snarled, my anger flaring in an unseen wind that whipped through the conservatory.

"The spell is a simple one, bound to a device in my office, and is easily dispelled. I give my word that it will be removed at the start of term," Dumbledore murmured quietly, "I do not do this to prevent you from using magic, Harry – indeed, you are free to do so, the enchantment will record only the nature of the spell."

"You expect me to allow you to muzzle me like a dog?" my words were delivered in a growl – I was absolutely livid. No dark magic? The fact that it was only a month to term did nothing to stem my anger.

"Pick your battles, Harry," He threw my own words back at me, and it took all of my will to restrain my rage. Stabbing my hand into my cloak and wrenching my arm free, I threw my wand at his chest. You're holding the weapon of your own murder, old man.

My fury did not seem to affect him at all, much to my dismay, as he waved his wand over my own before calmly returning it to rest atop my cloak. Staring at the dark fabric for a moment, he suddenly chuckled and spoke, "Truly remarkable that you managed to best such a creature, dear boy. I dare say it is a shame so many continue to underestimate you."

A shame that will be rectified in blood. My thoughts echoed in my mind as I drew breath and muttered in clipped tones, "Will that be all, Headmaster?"

"Almost, there is but one more matter to attend to," the older wizard murmured, and he seemed almost... jovial. Immediately I was on edge, giving him a calculating look as I leaned back in my seat.

"Yes?" I prompted slowly, my eyes never leaving his own as they began that infuriating twinkling.

Dumbledore stood, reaching into his robes to withdraw a box wrapped in bright blue paper. Setting the box atop my cloak next to my wand, he smiled at me and started towards the door. "Happy birthday, Harry," he murmured simply before exiting.

Did he just... I glanced at the box and back at the closed door, my mind reeling from the previous conversation and the multiple direction changes. Damn him!

Pointedly turning my gaze to the windows beside me, I stared out at the grounds around my manor. My gaze invariably drifted to the box, and I cursed my own curiosity as my hands snatched it and tore into the paper. Staring, I ran a finger slowly over the package of lemon drops contained within.

Gods damn him!

Those few days would be some of the longest of my life.

Ever since my conversation with Dumbledore, my anger had simmered just beneath the surface of my thoughts with no visible signs of ebbing away. Constantly I seemed to encounter the Weasleys or Longbottom in the halls or on the staircases, and their

constant looks and indiscreet whispering behind my back only served to fuel my silent rage.

Once I had even considered simply retreating to the fourth floor and waiting until the lot of them were gone, but immediately I had squashed that thought violently. I refuse to be a prisoner in my own home!

It was with that thought in mind that I descended the stairs this morning – this final, momentous morning. Today would be the last day of my suffering, and I had spent considerable time convincing myself of this in a vain attempt to rein in my temper. Just make it through today, Potter...

Sadly, it was not to be.

"Can't wait to get out of this bloody place," the youngest Weasley male groused as he began carrying luggage down from the second floor upon which they resided. Currently I stood at the bottom landing of the stairs, and my feet seemed rooted to the spot as I fought to contain my anger. Distantly I hoped they would recognize my presence and cease their conversation, and yet they remained oblivious.

"Honestly Ronald, it's not that bad... though I wish I could have gotten past the wards to the library..." Granger murmured to herself, and I fought the urge to scoff. Not bloody likely.

"Not that bad, 'Mione? With that damned murderer walking around the house like a bloody wraith?" Ron Weasley continued amidst sporadic grunts as he shifted his heavy luggage behind him. "It's a wonder he hasn't killed us in our sleep!" Now there's an intriguing thought.

"Harry just isn't social Ronald. It's nothing to really hold against him, especially after that awful possession..." Even I could tell Granger was grasping at straws as she continued hesitantly, "With all he's been through, it's no wonder he's a bit eccentric..."

All that I've been through? Eccentric? You don't know the half of it, Granger. I was hard pressed to decide what was more infuriating – Weasley's insults or Granger's pity.

"He fucking murdered Ginny!"

"Language, Ronald! And there's no evidence of that, you heard Professor Dumbledore!"

"And I can hear you both," I whispered darkly.

Dead silence descended on the staircase behind me as I stared ahead at the fireplace. Shuffling finally broke the quiet, before a muttered curse sounded from the male Weasley as his luggage slipped from his hands and crashed loudly down the final staircase.

Quickly sidestepping the falling object, I turned to glare at the redhead. My magic apparently chose to interpret it as a deliberate attack, judging by the glacial cold that spread up my spine. I never noticed when my wand entered my hand.

"Harry..." Granger started slowly, raising her hands as she and Weasley moved to opposite sides of the staircase, "Calm do—"

Granger would be interrupted by shrieking, however, from the portrait on the landing above her. The din of the falling suitcase had apparently awoken the harpy, as I had taken to calling her. "Mudbloods and blood traitors! Still in the House of Black!" She wailed before her eyes settled onto me and she immediately glared, "You still haven't kicked them out! You dare call yourself a Black!"

Shut up... just shut up... It was more than I could take, and I barely heard Granger call my name as waves of dark fire crashed into my mind and wrestled my will. My eyes focused on the portrait, peripheral vision darkening until the frame was all I could see.

"Did you steal that ring? There's no way you could possibly have inherited it!" The shrieking continued before the portrait's voice dropped to a mocking drawl, "Are you a mudblood t—"

"Cruormorsis!" It was instinctual, my will faltered for just a moment and the sickly green orb was born. Granger and Weasley screamed as the dark curse flew between them, missing them both by mere feet and impacting the portrait square in the woman's face. Impassively I watched her begin to scream as the ensorcelled canvas was consumed in ravenous acid.

Suffer... I whispered into my mind, her screams soothing the chaos within me as I watched the last scrap of paint dissolve. The frame slipped from the wall as the final enchantments failed, clamoring to the floor just as a door behind me flew open along with a dull roar from the fireplace.

"What... what was that noise?" the voice belonged to the Weasley matron, "You! What are you doing?" The evidence against me was likely damning, my wand pointing in the general direction of her son and Granger after all.

"Indeed Harry..." My if he isn't fast when he wants to be. I thought wryly as Dumbledore spoke, recalling the enchantment he had placed on my wand some days prior. "Would you care to explain this?" the old wizard's voice held a hard edge that was becoming familiar.

"Just a bit of remodeling, Professor," I offered idly, tucking my wand back into its holster on my sleeve. It was easier to think now that I had vented some of my wrath. I should curse things more often. The soft hissing as the wood frame dissolved was indeed mildly therapeutic.

"W-We're leaving..." the mother Weasley whispered, only then appearing to notice the acid dripping down the stairs from the middle landing. Streamers of blue and gold flickered around the liquid as protective wards fought to defend the stonework. "Ron, Hermione!" she called much louder, and the two of them cautiously slipped past me.

"B-Bloody mental..." I heard the male Weasley whisper as his mother shuffled them out of the room – thankfully Longbottom and the rest of the family had departed some moments prior. Presently, the fireplace roared thrice. Peace at last... well, almost.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath before exhaling it, finally turning and settling a calm gaze upon the only remaining occupant. "Just in time, wouldn't you agree?" I asked, almost conversationally.

"You disappoint me, Harry," the older wizard murmured quietly, to which I barked a laugh.

"I'm far past the point where your approval is relevant to me, sir. Save it for your golden boy," I muttered, walking away from the stairs to sit in a chair near the fireplace. "Would you like to stay for tea, Professor?" My tone was perhaps telling as I called my elf to prepare refreshment.

Dumbledore heaved a heavy sigh, one that might have garnered a small amount of pity from me some years prior. Now, however, I was hard pressed to keep the smirk from my face. "Regrettably I have other engagements this afternoon, Harry," he murmured, turning towards the fireplace.

"Truly a pity. Good day, Professor," I called, leaning back in my chair and managing to keep a straight face as he fixed me with an unreadable look.

"Indeed, good day Harry," he murmured at length before continuing, "Do not allow this to happen again." The edge in his voice carried clearly across the expansive parlor.

"There's no reason for it, at least not anymore," I replied immediately.

A slow, slight nod answered me – appearing to be for his benefit more than mine – before the aged wizard disappeared in a plume of flame.

"Well then..." I grinned, standing swiftly and nearly sending Tilly sprawling as she reappeared. "I've been waiting to do this for weeks!"

Raising the Black ring towards the fireplace, I extended my awareness to the wards and began to meticulously cut every privilege – be it floo, apparition or portkey – that had been given to others until my manor was effectively cut off from the outside world. No more Hotel Black. I was able to count those retaining access to my home on one hand.

A sudden thought struck me as I looked at the fireplace. "There's no real point in blocking Dumbledore's access, he'll just find a way to enter if he so desires," I murmured aloud – having no doubt that the old man had his ways to accomplish such feats.

I started to turn from the fireplace before I narrowed my eyes and spun, gesturing with my ring hand and severing the headmaster's access anyway. It's the principle of the matter.

"Masters wants his tea?" Tilly finally pressed, and I chuckled.

"Two lumps today, I feel like celebrating."

Sweet, blessed silence. I thought happily as I leafed through one of my Hogwarts' texts, absently taking a lemon drop from a pouch inside my robes. Currently, I was sitting in my study – which was located in the center of the second floor. I had immediately begun to inhabit the expansive room the moment the others had vacated my manor, mostly to drive home the fact that they were truly gone.

A letter had arrived a day prior with a listing of summer homework. With only three weeks before start of term. I groused mentally, though I was diligently completing it. Initially I had considered simply disregarding it and reveling in my few weeks of peace instead. My practical side eventually won out however, though I often caught myself contemplating ways to use the spells I researched in combat rather than for their more benign purpose. I was halfway through considering the usage of a tickling charm to stall a victim long enough to cast a cleaving curse before I frowned. I really need to find an outlet for this.

My magic was... restless. It had been less than a week since I'd cut myself off from civilization, and while my mind truly welcomed the peace it seemed other parts of me were going quite mad. The rosary at my neck constantly seemed to pulse, often dusting whatever I was reading in a thin layer of frost. No wonder the Death Eaters killed so many muggles in the last war. I thought wryly, disregarding the morbidity of the thought.

Finishing the charms essay, I reached to dip my quill into the ink and frowned as the tip struck a layer of ice within the bottle. "Fine," I muttered, standing and stretching as I walked downstairs, "perhaps I'll run into a rat to dispatch on the way."

Reaching the bottom of the landing, I glanced at the fireplace. I should just douse it – who really comes to visit me anyway? A better question would have been who really had access to do so, I mused.

A sudden urge drew me to stand in front of the fireplace, casting my gaze into the flickering embers. Fire is truly beautiful. My thoughts had grown increasingly whimsical as of late it seemed, though I allowed myself to stare at the dancing flames. Suddenly, they shifted to a bright emerald green.

Before my mind could register what that meant, a shape barreled through the wall of fire and struck me at speed. Grunting as I stumbled backwards and landed rather hard on my backside, I buried my wand into the side of whatever it was that lay atop me and brought my head up, a curse on the tip of my lips.

Bright blue eyes met mine, and as I watched they shifted to vivid green for an instant before the owner offered me a wan grin. "Wotcher, Harry!" Tonks began, glancing at my wand pressed into her ribs, "And I thought I was the one who hung around Moody too much, eh?"

Rolling my eyes, I tucked my wand back into my sleeve and gave her a bored look. "Are you going to lie there all day?" I asked idly, hiding a grin as she suddenly glanced down and took stock of her rather precarious position atop my stomach.

Her eyes bulged as she quickly shot to her feet. "Err... sorry about that. What are you doing playing the floo-mat anyway? Don't you know not to stand in front of fireplaces?" She asked, cocking her head down at me – to which I responded by offering her a hand and a frown.

Flushing, Tonks grabbed my hand and levered me to my feet, and I took a moment to dust off the stray ash on my robes. "I don't get many visitors, it must have slipped my mind," I murmured dryly, to which she nodded absently and looked around.

"Place is lookin' a lot better, hope you're not working those little buggers too hard," she stated as she drifted through the parlor.

"No more than they can handle." By my definition. "What brings you to see me today?" I asked, noting her eyes glance towards the door to the dining area. "And are you hungry?" I added wryly.

"Absolutely starving! Been out on some fieldwork with Moody all morning, then suddenly he gets this patronus, says it's urgent and

dumps me at headquarters," she grouched, crossing her arms. "Told me I had the day off, and the academy doesn't kick back into full swing for another week," she continued, giving me an expectant look.

"So you want me to feed you," I murmured slowly, to which she nodded.

"Yep, I figure since you're Mr. Moneybags now, you can afford to treat your best friend and all," Her grin was wide enough to make me wonder if her metamorph abilities factored into it. Probably.

Sighing, I snapped my fingers – to which a pop heralded the arrival of Tilly. Tonks jumped as the elf appeared only a few feet from her. "I taught her that," I offered proudly, which earned me an unreadable look. "My friend requires something to eat," I explained to the elf, who turned her wide eyes to gaze up at Tonks.

"Err... just a sandwich will be fine," Tonks stated, obviously a bit put off talking to the smaller creatures.

"And pumpkin juice," I added to the order, paying no mind as Tilly happily nodded and popped away, gesturing to a seat instead. "I trust you've been busy?" I asked, sinking down on one side of a couch.

"You've got no bloody idea..." Tonks muttered, sitting a few feet away from me and leaning her head back. "Caught three of the bastards, all of them claim the Imperius from the other guy. Damned mess, we're waiting on approval to pour some veritaserum down their throats and get the real story," she grumbled the last just as Tilly reappeared.

Tonks took the sandwich and murmured thanks, while I accepted my goblet of pumpkin juice and returned to assessing the junior-Auror next to me. "It takes approval to use truth serum?" I asked idly, recalling my trial. They didn't even bother with it, not that it would have changed anything.

"Yeah, apparently the stuff is a bit expensive. Mad-Eye had kittens when he found out he had to fill out three sets of forms requesting it for the lot," she snorted in laughter as she tucked into her sandwich, and even I had to grin at the image. "So... what happened to the

others?" Tonks asked slowly after a moment, and I noticed her looking around at various dark corners.

"Looking for where I stashed the bodies?" I asked dryly, and judging by her flush I wasn't far off. "I managed to convince Dumbledore that all parties would be better served by them returning to their own residences," I explained succinctly.

"Really...?"

"That's precisely how it happened." Sorta.

"And he agreed to that?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you having me on?"

"Pardon?"

"Harry..."

"Tonks?"

My guest sighed at length, finishing her sandwich then turning her head to fix me with a look. "So what have you been up to? Just sitting around in this big house all day?"

"Mostly. I've been working to finish my summer homework while exploring some of the tomes in the library," I explained, wincing internally. It does sound pretty boring when I put it that way.

"And you aren't going stir crazy yet?" She asked slowly, looking around at the sparsely-decorated manor.

Several frozen pages in my Hogwarts texts flashed through my mind and I quickly brushed them aside. "Not at all, I've..." I started, then trailed off as she fixed me with a penetrating look. "Fine, yes, I'm bored out of my mind," I muttered, glancing at the sheen of ice spreading over the goblet of pumpkin juice in my hand.

"What say we have one of those training sessions like old times, eh?" Tonks asked suddenly, and I blinked before slowly smiling. Perfect.

"Do I get to pelt your bum with stinging hexes again?" I asked, and my enthusiasm was perhaps too telling – judging by her expression.

"Why? Afraid to duel little old Tonksie properly, mm?" the challenge in her voice was unmistakable, and a part of me immediately accepted it.

"Third floor, west wing," I grinned, standing and heading up the stairs.

The dueling hall in the manor was not a room I had explored in depth, nor was it a priority given to the elves to clean. Despite that, it served its purpose – it was an open area, and had reinforced walls to absorb stray spells.

"You better get me a nice Christmas present is all I gotta say," Tonks muttered as we entered the room, and I recalled this had been her first trip past the ground floor of the manor.

"What was wrong with my present back in first year?" I asked, frowning.

"Normally when people gift spell-warded armor, they buy a full set Harry, not just the bottoms!"

Stifling a grin, I retorted, "Well at the time, that's what you needed most!"

A stinging hex left her wand in short order, and I scrambled to dodge it – tripping over the raised dueling platform and landing in a rather undignified heap.

Pushing myself to my feet, I made a show of dusting off my cloak. The junior-Auror rolled her eyes, muttering, "Come on slowpoke, are you gonna worry about your wardrobe in a real fi—"

I jerked my wand in three swift slashes, sending a trio of stinging hexes at her in a triangle pattern. Her blue eyes bulged momentarily before she threw herself into motion, twisting her body to allow two

of the spells to pass her – though a miscalculation on her part ensured the last hex struck her firmly on the posterior.

"Ow! Damn I forgot how fast you are with those things!" she muttered, and I smirked.

"I'm quite accurate too, no?" I asked teasingly, assuming what I believed was a dueling stance.

"Your form is bloody rough," she offered, grinning, "And I'm not gonna fix it 'till I beat your ass at least once – ready?"

My magic surged in me, and the smile on my face was the most genuine I had worn in some time. "Give me your worst."

She answered with a grin before suddenly jerking her wand forward, sending the bright red bolt of a stunner directly towards me. Throwing myself to the side, I responded with a swift blue charm – the spell fast enough that it just clipped her shoulder as she spun.

Tonks began to giggle, though the expression on her face was rapidly darkening, "Oh you bastard... heh... heheh... gonna kick your ass!"

Proceeding to do just that, I could only watch in dismay as a mere three spells later saw me upended and stuck to the far wall. So undignified!

Without ceremony, Tonks proceeded to cut the spell binding me and sent me sprawling to the ground. I pushed myself to my feet and glowered at her. Landed on my damn head.

"Spread your feet further apart," the Auror began idly, approaching me as I did as she asked. "Wand arm up, tip down," she continued, taking my arm and positioning it, glancing at my free hand. "Put that behind your back."

"But what if I want to throw a dagger or use a crucifix?" I asked sarcastically, which only earned me a roll of the eyes.

"Don't forget to use a shield if you can't dodge," she called as she walked back to the other side of the dueling platform. Nodding, I waited for her to get back into position.

Our sparring continued for some time, typically resulting in me ending up on my back or having a brief bout of unconsciousness until she revived me.

My spell repertoire is abysmal. I realized as we fought, most of my spells being typical Hogwarts fare that she easily predicted and countered. To this point in my life I had survived my battles solely on the few dark curses I knew, and I could hardly use those against Tonks.

Stumbling as I dodged one spell, a banishing hex sent me spinning to the ground to land hard on my shoulder. I shoved myself up with a growl, trying to catch my breath. My poor nutrition over the last year seemed to be catching up with me as I began to succumb to fatigue.

"You alright, Harry?" she asked, concern lacing her words and sparking my annoyance.

"I'm fine," I muttered, rolling my now-smarting shoulder as I squared off once more. She frowned at me, her wand tip lowering slightly as she took a breath to speak. I told you I'm fine! I snapped in my mind, firing an immobilizing hex.

The sudden spell surprised her, and her Auror training kicked in – a swift shield negating the spell, followed by a half turn and a stunner that caught me square in the chest. Damn that shield! I thought savagely as my vision darkened.

Awakening moments later to the tingling of an enervate spell, I swatted her offered hand away and pushed myself to my feet. I want to win at least once! My frustration was rising, to the point I didn't realize when the throbbing in my shoulder was numbed with cold.

"Maybe we should take a break, yeah?" she offered with a concerned expression, to which I quickly shook my head.

"Again," I growled, walking to the other side of the dueling platform when she refused to move. I'm not going down again.

"Harry..."

"Give me your worst."

Narrowing her eyes, she sent a disarming hex at me – likely intending to take my wand and end it. I spun to the side, letting the bolt strike the wall behind me. Continuing to spin, I turned my head only to find a stunner rocketing towards me before I had recovered.

Familiar swirls of ebony danced into my peripheral vision as time seemed to slow, yet the stunner continued towards me unabated. No, not again! I snarled into my mind, steeling myself as the spell struck my cloak.

Silver runes flared in the fabric, nearly sending me to the floor from the sudden drain upon my magic. The stunner splashed harmlessly over the dark material as I continued my spin, but I refused to allow myself to be distracted from my purpose. Now!

"Stupefy!" I shouted the spell, feeling a torrent of power rush from my core and into my wand. A vortex of crimson manifested at the tip, and as I stared at the gathering miasma I couldn't help but feel a certain wrongness about it. It's not giving off any light at all...

My eyes met Tonks' for a moment, witnessing her surprise as she snapped off that same familiar shield just as the spell lanced through the air towards her.

The spell plowed through the shimmering barrier as if it simply wasn't there. Striking her high in the chest, the crimson bolt sent her flying through the air to crash into the wall behind her. She fell to the ground unmoving.

"T-Tonks...?" I whispered, glancing at my wand hand and staring at the frost dusting my fingertips. No... "Tonks!"

Dashing towards her, I forced myself not to touch her until I managed the only diagnostic charm known to me. I cursed as it took me three attempts to manage the spell, then sighed in relief as it finally reported she had no broken bones.

"Hey, wake up," I murmured, fighting the panic within me as I rolled her over with effort. Fool, the counter-spell!

"Enervate!" I intoned, staring with baited breath as the spell struck her body. Still, she refused to wake.

No, no no no... The fear in me warred with the cold that still stained my insides. This is your fault! I growled to the swelling embers inside of me.

"You will wake her up..." I whispered darkly, gathering the cold and jabbing my wand into her stomach, all but shouting the invocation, "Enervate!"

The spell flashed again, brighter, as wisps of blue-white power danced over her body and arced like electricity between the folds of her clothing. Slowly, her eyes began to flutter open.

"Tonks?" I asked softly, gently shaking her shoulders while hefting her upper body into my lap.

"Not fair... wearin' armor..." she mumbled, and I stared at her as relief flooded my body. "Holding out on me... bloody git!"

"Sorry," I offered, managing to help her sit up as she leaned heavily against me. "Are you alright?"

"Will be once my head quits ringing," she muttered, giving me a mild glare and pointing a finger vaguely in the direction of my cloak. "So that's why you're wearing that sodding thing all the damn time!" Yes... that's exactly it.

"So you're more annoyed about the fact your stunner didn't put me under... than the fact mine suddenly went through your shield?" I asked slowly, trying to wrap my head around it.

"Well yeah, Mad-Eye's always sayin' my shields are a ruddy disgrace," she mumbled, forcing me to fight the urge to sigh. Great confidence builder there.

Calling my elf for a pain potion, I offered it to Tonks and helped her drink it. She fell forward coughing, raising my concern for a moment before she fixed me with a glare. Oh... I haven't restocked the cabinets. Sheepishly, I offered, "Well, it's probably at least 15 years old. I'm sure the preservation charms were still working, though!"

"Now he poisons me," she muttered, pushing herself to her feet and visibly swaying. I hurriedly stood up and helped her over to a

windowsill to sit. "The hell kinda stunner was that anyway?" Good question... Dumbledore hasn't shown up yet, at least.

"Erm... an effective one?" Smart, Harry.

"Git!"

"Sorry!"

Tonks frowned at me, but finally accepted my evasiveness and leaned back in her seat. "I should get back to the Ministry, 'case the old gaffer is looking for me."

"Are you sure you should be walking?" I asked slowly.

"You tell me, you cast the bloody spell!" Irritability is definitely a side-effect.

"Right. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Thank Merlin for that," she muttered dryly, standing and appearing much more stable – at least as stable as was typical for the metamorph.

"He did say you had the day off, you know," I stated suddenly, recalling her earlier words.

"What, feel like knocking me into another wall?"

"Not my fault you chose to shield instead of dodge." My worries over, I easily fell back into stride.

"You..." she started, fixing me with a look I hadn't seen since my first year of Hogwarts. Not that...

"No, I forbid it Tonks!"

"...GIT!" she growled, grabbing me in a headlock and immediately grinding her fist through my hair. Ow!

"Stop it!" So undignified!

The next morning found me sitting alone at my dining table, glancing through an issue of the Prophet as I sipped at a cup of coffee.

Boy-Murderer inherits Black estate – Is there justice in the world?

Quickly lowering the cup lest I spew the hot liquid everywhere, I glowered at the headline. "I could tell you about justice," I whispered darkly, turning a page to read the article. Sources at Gringotts have confirmed that Harry Potter, recently pardoned by the Ministry for the murders of three muggles and two Aurors, has indeed received ownership of the extensive Black family holdings some weeks prior. According to an unnamed source, an apparent legal loophole was used by Mr. Potter to...

I gripped the paper tighter as my anger rose with each word, though I was thankfully spared from delving too deeply into my rage as the ring upon my left hand suddenly flashed. A visitor?

"Mornin'..." a familiar voice murmured from behind me as the door to the parlor opened, and I watched as Tonks fell into the seat next to me. "Why's it so bloody cold in here?"

Deciding against answering the question, I instead took stock of the junior-Auror next to me. "Brown hair today? Not very striking."

"I forgot to give you your birthday present yesterday," she stated, for once evading one of my own questions as she pushed a box towards me across the table. "It was late already, but I was really busy back then and..."

"Its fine, Tonks," I murmured softly, frowning as I continued to inspect her face. Has she even slept? She'd left early the evening prior, and I hadn't expected to see her again so soon.

"Well, open it!" she brightened slightly, and I nodded.

This looks familiar... I thought as the box gave way to a small wooden figure. The training dummy from first year?

"Just tap that rune on his head to make him life-size, then tap it twice to start him up," Tonks explained, smiling at me. "After yesterday, it looked like you needed the dodging practice more than me... for the most part."

Rub it in. I thought dryly, though in truth I could harbor little annoyance towards her with the state she was in at the moment. "Thanks, Tonks."

"Yeah, happy late birthday!" her cheerfulness began to wane, even as Tilly arrived with a plate of breakfast – for two. Considerate elf. "Thanks for—" Tonks started, frowning as the elf popped away in the middle of her statement. "Bugger."

We tucked in, though I continued to assess her throughout the meal. Her eyes weren't their usual bright cobalt, instead appearing as a muted navy. Something is bothering her.

"I got re-assigned," she stated suddenly, leaning back in her chair and staring at the wooden table. Re-assigned?

"Why?"

"Dunno. Went into the Ministry early this morning... Mad-Eye always makes me get there at six, yeah? Well, he's not there. Desk has a letter from him, says he has more important things to do than babysit a trainee..." she trailed off, her eyes flickering orange for a moment. "So I got re-assigned to guarding the lobby starting at noon today, at least until the academy starts back up next week."

A spark of anger settled in me, and I glared at the table in front of me. "He's a fool if he can't invest the time in a promising young Auror," I offered supportively, and she suddenly laughed.

"It's funny, I sat up last night wondering if he was finally ready to call it quits with me y'know? I never got a patronus from him, and he always sends one. One of his peeves is not being in the know..." she sighed, leaning forward and pillowing her arms on the table before burying her head between them. "Bloody old git."

She made no noise, but I saw her shoulders shake slightly. Oh no. Reaching over, I began to rub her back slowly. "You're better off without him," I offered – it was my own personal opinion, at least.

Her head rocked sideways as she shook it, and I heard the first sniffles come from within the nest of her arms. I'm going to kill you, Alastor Moody.

"I... had it all planned out, y'know?" she asked, her voice muffled by her arms, "Gonna apprentice with the best, get through the academy fast, get my commission and be a full-fledged A-Auror..." her voice cracked suddenly and her shoulders began to shake once again. Still so silent...

"Nothing is stopping you," I argued, frowning. "Moody may be good, but it's irrelevant to your future. He's not the one putting the work in, you are," I continued, surprising even myself with the conviction in my words. She deserves better than that old bastard. Anger began to swell in me and I fought it back savagely. This isn't the time.

Perhaps it was the continued soft sobs coming from beside me or simply the fact I wanted to do something other than fester in my own anger – regardless, I stood and wrapped her in my arms. "Shh," I whispered, blinking as she suddenly threw her arms around me and pressed her face into my chest. It was such a big deal to her...

I rubbed her back for a long moment as I stood there, feeling her arms tighten around my stomach as she silently cried. Stroking her hair, a sudden thought struck me as I watched my right hand slide through the soft brown locks. I don't deserve to touch her. Not with the blood on these hands.

"Sometimes I wish you were older..." she whispered suddenly, breaking me from my thoughts. I tried to look down into her eyes, though they remained hidden against my robe.

"So do I, I get tired of having to look up to my lessers so often," I quipped, and her shoulders shook with a snort.

"Arrogant bugger... not what I meant," she explained, leaning her head back and smiling at me through her tears. What did you mean then?

At my curious look she just shook her head, wiping her eyes. "Thanks for letting me cry on you, sorry about that..." she mumbled, smiling slightly, "I really missed you last year, didn't realize it until the letters stopped..."

A lance of pain stabbed at my heart from her admission. I hurt her. "I'm sorry," I offered quietly.

"It wasn't your fault, Harry," she stated seriously before sighing and leaning against me again, "Sorry I'm so mokey..." she trailed off, staring up at me.

"What?" I asked after a moment of her scrutiny, seeing her dark blue eyes briefly shift to a vibrant green before resuming their earlier shade. Why does she do that?

"Oh sod it all to hell," she muttered before suddenly leaning up and lightly pressing her lips to mine. I froze.

Pulling back after the briefest of moments, she smiled and stood. "Thanks for breakfast, Harry," she murmured, slipping past me. "I'll see you later."

Tonks left before I managed to recover, my hand rising to my lips slowly as I blinked in bewilderment.

What was that about...?

Rain pelted the windows of my bedroom.

I stood before them, dressed only in a pair of slacks as I watched the water fall in rivulets down the glass. Tomorrow. I thought, gazing out into the driving rain and darkened evening. Thunder echoed from outside, causing me to involuntarily tighten my grip on the supple leather in my left hand.

Tomorrow I would return to Hogwarts and these few weeks of peace would fall into the archives of my memory. It's going to be chaos this year. I mused, glancing at the morning's edition of the Prophet laying on my bed. Boy-Murderer to return to Hogwarts – are your children safe? My scoff was oddly loud in the humid air.

Tonks had returned to the Auror academy over two weeks ago. I miss her. And Bella. To my dismay, I'd found I simply didn't enjoy my solitude as much as I liked to think. Without the distraction of visitors or even schoolwork, my idle mind inevitably drew me to dwell upon my past – and such memories were dangerous. My magic was a vicious thing; it fed on the suffering of memory.

Casting my eyes to my hands, I examined the dagger held loosely in my grasp. I'd found it some days prior in the nightstand next to my bed, and had been admiring it on and off ever since.

The grip was wrapped in dark leather and adorned with a slim cross-guard, while a matching pair of emeralds marked the sides of the pommel – the Black crest adorned within each. The blade itself was nothing overly special, roughly ten inches of steel with two small runes engraved near the base. Strengthening and sharpening. Elegant simplicity, really.

Perhaps it belonged to the former owner. I mused, glancing back at the large four-poster bed in the center of the room. In the end, it didn't really matter. It's mine now.

A bolt of lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the polished steel clutched in my left hand. Just like that night...

A young boy sniffled in the dark.

His back and legs hurt, swollen from the welts that adorned them. I was hungry... He justified within his mind, wrapping his arms tighter around himself for warmth.

The crack of thunder echoed from outside, and he shivered as he huddled beneath his threadbare blanket. I wish the door was open. I wish I was out of this place... He thought, daring not to speak aloud. They might hear him, despite the late hour. It's so cold.

So cold... The latch of the cupboard shuddered, and the boy flinched – expecting his relatives to come, expecting...

The door opened slowly.

Daring to lower his arms from their defensive position about his head, he slowly took stock of the darkened living room beyond the door frame. Managing to force himself to his feet, he swayed slightly before stepping forward and exiting his prison.

They must be asleep. He reasoned as he took in the dark room – it was hard for him to keep up with the passage of time. Who opened the door, though? He cast a suspicious gaze about his surroundings.

His legs carried him slowly into the living room before another sharp crack of thunder caused him to jump, making it halfway back to his cupboard before he stopped. It's just the thunder. Aunt Petunia says it's stupid to be scared of it. He recalled, turning past the stairs and wandering into the kitchen.

The tile floors were cold to his bare feet, causing him to shiver as he dashed to stand on the rug near the sink. Bright green eyes surveyed the window above the faucet, watching as the rain pelted the glass.

Pretty... Lightning split the sky, and his eyes bulged as he watched the blue-white flash illuminate the blade of a chef's knife resting in the drying rack. Just a few hours earlier, he'd used it to help prepare dinner – the same dinner that had resulted in his injuries at the hands of his uncle.

A whim led to him standing on his tip-toes, his arm groping at the rack until he found the handle of the knife. The blade was larger than his forearm, and he had to clutch it with both hands.

He was only five, after all.

Turning the blade over in his hands, he marveled at his reflection in the steel. Uncle Vernon would hurt me if he saw me with this. The thought came suddenly, and he nearly dropped the knife as he gasped.

"I hate Uncle Vernon," He dared whisper to the knife, gazing at it as another flash of lightning lit the blade, "He hurts me..." Slowly the boy's expression changed, green eyes widening as he came to a revelation. "I bet you could hurt him!"

The young boy gripped the knife tighter and clutched it to his chest, padding back across the kitchen to stand at the base of the stairs. Still cold... He thought, shivering openly in his hand-me-down clothing.

Slowly he ascended the stairs, trying to be as quiet as he could. He had only been up here once before, and his uncle had not been pleased.

Approaching his aunt and uncle's bedroom, he held his breath and slowly opened the door. His eyes had long since become accustomed to the darkness, and he was able to slowly creep his way along the carpet floor until he stood next to his uncle's sleeping form.

Thunder echoed again from outside, and the boy stifled the urge to gasp as he clutched the knife closer to his chest. I can't reach... He realized after a moment, glancing up at his uncle above him on the bed.

Looking around for a moment, his eyes landed on the chair to his aunt's vanity. Carefully, he slid it along the carpet until it was positioned next to the bed and then slowly climbed atop it.

What do I do...? He wondered, worrying his lip for a moment in indecision as he glanced between the knife and his uncle's snoring form. Cold... His body felt absolutely freezing, though his shivering had stopped without his notice.

Bright young eyes narrowed as he stared at the man's bulbous neck. There. He decided, hefting the knife slowly and clutching it tightly in both hands. Raising his hands high, he bit his lip and tensed the muscles in his body...

Thunder boomed from outside, forcing a gasp from the boy as the house shook. Lightning flashed near-endlessly from a nearby window, illuminating the risen blade in the boy's hands just as his uncle's eyes shot open.

Wide, frightened green eyes met confused blue for a moment. Blue darkened to navy before a hand shot out and backhanded the young boy, sending him sprawling from his perch with a muted cry to land hard on the ground. The knife flipped along the floor and landed some distance away.

No! He reached for the gleaming blade and the promise of escape it offered. A large foot came down savagely, and the boy screamed as his extended arm shattered from the stomp.

"Freak!"

Enough!

I cut the stream of memory savagely, squeezing the dagger in my hand so tightly my fingers had long since gone numb. Vernon is dead. Dead! I cut him in half! It took me some time to convince myself of the fact. Distantly, I noticed I was shaking in rage. Dumbledore, Voldemort, the Ministry, the muggles... All of them had a hand in these scars!

Closing my eyes, I took several long breaths. I have to master this anger. How long until my restraint falters? How long until I'm so blinded with rage that I kill again?

"Irrelevant," I spoke suddenly, the humid evening broken by a cool breeze that blew across my spine. The lives of fools and pawns aren't an asset to this world. My eyes narrowed as I saw my reflection slowly nod, the green orbs standing out starkly against the murky environs beyond.

But I must be cunning. Silent. I couldn't challenge Dumbledore or the Ministry... at least not yet. One day. The thoughts brought a cruel smile to my face as I reached out and rested a hand on the glass, casting my desires to the dark pyre within me. One day we'll break this world. Hairs on my neck rose as I felt a northern wind churn within my breast in response. I'll have vengeance on every single one of them that has wronged me! Ice began to spread from my splayed fingers. We'll set this world aflame, and watch as the winter gales stir the ashes!

Thunder boomed from beyond the window and broke me from my reverie. Closing my eyes once more, I slowly released the anger. "If I can make it through the year without dying, to the kiss or otherwise, then I'll call it a victory," I whispered quietly, shaking my head as I beheld the frosted glass before me. Calm down, Potter.

I tucked the dagger into its sheathe and turned from the ice-bound window, walking slowly towards my wardrobe and opening my trunk. It was time to pack.

Hogwarts.

A/N: A bit of story progression, a bit of fluff, a bit of rage and a bit of filler – but a necessary transition chapter nonetheless.

Next chapter should ramp things up a bit.